

*The
Thoroughbred
By Henry Kitchell Webster*

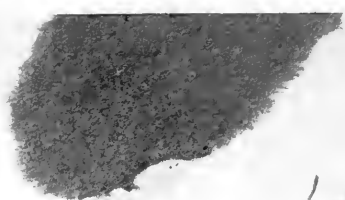




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THE THOROUGHBRED





THE THOROUGHbred

By

HENRY KITCHELL WEBSTER

AUTHOR OF

The Real Adventure, The Painted Scene, etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

W. B. KING

INDIANAPOLIS

THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY

PUBLISHERS

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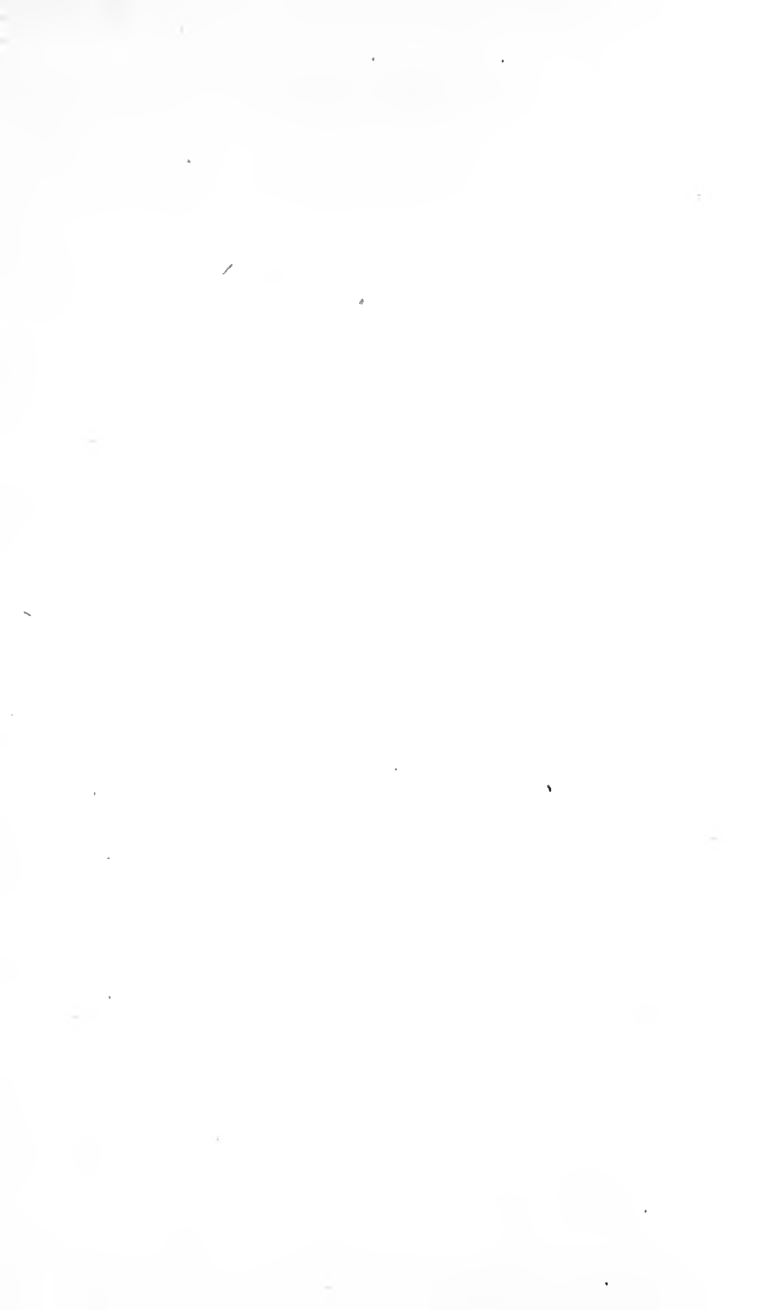
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CHAPTER I

ON EDGE

WHEN Celia heard his latch-key, she sang out from her room, the open door of which was at the head of the stairs:

"You'll have to fly, Fred. It's a quarter to seven and they're coming at half past."

A minute later, realizing that he had not answered, that there had indeed been no sound at all since the click of the closing door, she called:

"It's you, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's me," she heard him say. And then came the swish of his evening papers and the clatter of the big buttons on his overcoat as he dumped

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it carelessly on the oak settle at the foot of the stairs.

But there was another silence after that. Whatever was he doing down there? She even arrested the movement of her lamb's-wool so that she could listen better. Then, with a frown (not an ill-tempered frown; a rueful one of exasperated patience, which one saw pretty often in her face when she was talking to, or about, her husband) she started toward the door to investigate. But before she had taken more than a step or two in that direction she heard him lumbering up and went back to her dressing-table.

The glimpse of the doorway that she got in her mirror showed her that he had stopped there, but even without that, she could have felt him looking at her. So, without turning, she greeted him with a good-humored "Hello," and added, "You heard what I said, didn't you? It's nearly seven and they're coming at half past."

"Are there people coming to dinner? All right."

His voice was stiff with preoccupation—hardly

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articulate. He might have been talking in his sleep.

She shot a glance at him over her shoulder. "You don't mean to say you'd forgotten all about the dinner, Fred!"

In that same level voice, with neither surprise nor contrition in it, he admitted that he had. "But it's all right," he repeated. "There's plenty of time."

"Not if you want to shave in the guest's bath-room," she warned him. "You'll have to be out of there with all your lathery things, and clear up after yourself, before a quarter past, because the Colliers are driving out from town and they may be a little early. And I can't spare Marie to pick up after you, because I'm going to use her myself."

He said "All right" again, in that same dull, half-conscious sort of way, so that she whipped round upon him energetically.

"For heaven's sake, Fred, wake up and be human! Go down-stairs and get yourself a drink. That sleep-walking way of yours is growing on you

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and you've no idea how maddening it is!" She made as if to turn back to her dressing-table, but faltered. "Nothing's—happened, I suppose," she said.

He answered, "No. Nothing's happened." And added below his breath, "That's it."

She didn't hear the last two words and would hardly have understood them if she had. But the look and the tone were unmistakable.

"Oh, I know, you poor old dear!" she said. She meant her voice to sound sympathetic, but in spite of herself, the words came out petulantly, and a realization of this made her add, "You know, don't you, Fred, that I wouldn't keep you going like this if I didn't think it was really good for you to buck up and forget your worries for a while? You do slump so when we're just together and there's nothing to do. And I know that doesn't help you, and it's deadly for me. Don't you think you're better in the morning if you've forgotten to worry for a while at night? You don't think I'm just a selfish beast, do you?"

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He said, "No. It's all right. I'll buck up and enjoy your party." But instead of going out of the room, he came into it; came up close behind her and took her bare arms in his hands. "There's time enough to give a chap a kiss, isn't there?"

She recognized his attempt to make the request sound good-humored and casual; as if what he asked for were nothing but the affectionate symbol good manners entitled him to. But even without the tell-tale evidence afforded by the edge in his voice and the look of his eyes in the mirror, just on the basis of long experience with him, she'd have known better. There seemed always to be something very inviting about her for him at just this stage of her toilet; it was the contrast, perhaps, between what was so completely finished and what was not yet begun, that added piquancy to her other charms; between the highly professional "do" on her hair—(it was reddish brown, but you needed a strong light to be made aware of the downright red there was in it. Under a milder illumination its brown looked merely warm. She had a lot of it

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and it was, perhaps, the chief item of her good looks, though her features were neatly chiseled and regular enough to support the attention her hair and the color of her skin attracted)—and the tumbled recklessness of her kimono. And then the background; over the foot of the bed the rose-red dinner-gown which her silk stockings and satin slippers matched, the sumptuous, scented array of toilet articles on the dressing-table, the costly, fluffy, feminine things that hung out of the half-open bureau drawers. Even through his preoccupation as he stood in the doorway, she'd been aware—pleasantly aware, too—that he was taking it all in.

But as he came up close and took hold of her she leaned a little forward for a closer inspection of her face in the mirror, and answered his request for a kiss with the remark:

“You rode out in the smoker to-night, didn't you? What unspeakable sort of things do they smoke in places like that?”

His arms fell at his sides and he stepped back.

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Indeed the impact of a good muscular push would have been no more effective of her purpose. She added in a tone of fretful apology, "There isn't time to fool, Fred, really. It's seven o'clock. Do run along."

She knew quite well that it was not because he smelled smoky, nor because there wasn't time for the embrace he wanted, that she had turned him out like that. If she'd been more indifferent and less in love with him, she wouldn't have minded.

It was a very old instinct in her, as old as anything about herself that she could remember—as old as the first starched frock of her childhood, to hate being rumpled. She knew that. But she did not at all realize the first-class importance of it. Her whole development during more than a score of years had been profoundly modified by it. It is interesting to speculate whether the instinct worked from within out, or from without in. Was it, to begin with, just a sensuous, tactile delight in smooth surfaces of fine texture that kept her aloof, in her play, from all that clasped tight, gripped hard—

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and left marks and creases? And had the thing gradually worked in to her soul? Or was the childish impulse to keep everything at arm's length and finger's tip, the outer sign, merely, of something that lay, from the beginning, at the very core of her? It matters very little. The important thing is that the two surfaces of her, the outer and the inner, corresponded—whichever it was that had shaped the other—and that they both were only surfaces.

It had not been, in her childhood, that she lacked energy to play, didn't want to play; and it occasionally happened that the energy bottled up reached a pressure and the want an urgency that carried her off, had her crumpled, panting before she knew it. When that happened, she ran wild for a while. Well, no more was it, now she was grown, that she was incapable of strong emotions. Nor was it the emotions themselves that she resented; it was their power to tumble and ruffle that smooth, fine-grained surface of hers. She hated being made to cry, or blush, or tremble, hated the

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drum of the pulse in her throat and ears. So, when she could, she held at arm's length experiences she suspected of the power to produce these effects.

Like most radical instincts, it seldom obtruded on her consciousness. She'd have denied, quite sincerely, that it had anything to do with the major decisions of her life; with, to take the supreme case, her marriage with Alfred Blair. But it did have a lot to do with it. It also explained the slight sensation of surprise that ran around her circle of friends when her engagement to him was announced.

He was perfectly eligible, of course. Only not just the man they'd have expected Celia French, with her exaggerated fastidiousness, to select.

Alfred Blair was a man of whom every one spoke well. But, in speaking well of him, they were likely to use rather uninviting adjectives—self-made, steady, industrious.

He was steady and industrious, and the adjective self-made was, perhaps, justified by the fact that though he was a licensed architect, and a skilful engineer, he was ornamented by no college degrees.

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He'd finished up his formal education in one of Chicago's technical high schools, got a job at nineteen with a firm of contracting engineers that specialized in grain-elevators and certain other forms of warehouses, factories and markets. At twenty-five, when his big opportunity came, he had the audacity to grasp it; borrowed every cent of his mother's little fortune, and launched himself in a similar business of his own. His first big contract, which had given him his opportunity, had enabled him to pay back his mother's loan with a considerable increment as her share of the profits (he had insisted upon this) and left him established. At thirty-five, when he and Celia were married, he had ten successful years behind him and the assured sense of power that success brings.

A man of more exuberant manners, on the strength of a record like that, would have been called brilliant. Blair's quiet, steady, unornamental way made the adjective impossible; caused him to be summed up, by casual acquaintances at

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least, in a set of terms which didn't account for him at all.

The thing that made it all the easier for persons who had mastered a social skill to patronize him, was that he was much too open-minded to despise the things he knew he lacked and too simple to pretend to a mild contempt of them. He wasn't ashamed to show an almost wistful admiration of and desire for the graces and refinements of life. Which accounted amply, of course, for his falling in love with Celia French.

But what attraction had he for Celia? The less affectionate of her acquaintances had, of course, an explanation ready to hand. The Frenches had never been so well-to-do as they tried to look. Celia had never had a proper dress allowance and had had to do a lot of contriving even to go through the motions of paying off her social obligations. Here was a decently presentable man with plenty of money. It was as simple as two and two.

Her real friends resented this imputation hotly.

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When you got to know Alfred Blair, you found him singularly attractive. He had such a straight way of looking, and speaking, and doing things. He had a pleasantly modulated voice. He had, according to one or two enthusiasts, real tact and charm. The question whether she'd have married him, had he not been prosperous, was a perfectly barren one. Alfred Blair would never have asked her to.

But not even her most intimate friends hit upon the one decisive quality about him that had seen the girl, happily and without misgiving, through a three-months' engagement and the beginnings of their married life. This was a touch of timidity about him, almost reverent, that kept him from coming too close too soon.

Celia was twenty-six when she met him, and had had experience enough with her own amatory emotions to believe she understood them. She had been engaged once and half-engaged another time, to say nothing of an indefinite number of young men—three or four, anyway—who had come up to

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the point where she had had to take a line with them. She probably would have engaged herself to marry the second man, had not her break with the first made her wary.

That experience with her first lover had been a shock. Her promise to marry him had transformed him unbelievably into a stranger, and her feeling for him, which she had confidently diagnosed as true love, had curdled overnight into an active aversion. The thing that led to her dismissal of the second man was a lack of confidence in herself, rather than in him. She'd thought a good deal and asked a few questions, and profound and disquieting misgivings were the result.

And then came Alfred Blair, who put the misgivings to flight. The thing he'd given her first was an unfathomable sense of security. All the facts about him fitted in, of course; that he was older, that he was self-disciplined, and, it can not be denied, that he was prosperous. She tested him, cautiously at first, then with growing confidence. The little privileges she gave him, she freely am-

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plified when she found he never tried to amplify them for himself. These restraints never led her to doubt the genuineness of his passion for her. That was plain enough for the blind to see. But the will that reined it in was supreme.

Her new engagement and her marriage were wonderful restoratives to her confidence. She felt her attitude to her two former lovers, which had caused her more doubts and unhappiness than she was willing to admit, triumphantly justified. Her instincts had not been wrong after all. Happiness didn't necessarily hurt nor deface. For a while she was utterly content, and her contentment was spiced by a mild pity for pretty much all the rest of the world, and especially for the girls who had married those two former lovers of hers.

It was from an unexpected quarter that her Nemesis began creeping up on her—the unruly, irrepressible growth within herself of a passion for her husband. She found the fine silken fabric of their life imperiled by impulses of her own that terrified her. Jealousy was one of them—utterly

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without foundation in fact, she knew, which made it all the more terrifying.

There was little Nora Brice, for example, somewhere about twenty, whose people had lost all their money, and who, as much from inclination as from necessity, gave dancing lessons. The Blairs and two or three couples of their friends had her in, occasionally, to keep them up to the minute, and she and Alfred had taken an innocently shameless fancy to each other. She laughed at him—treated him like a boy, proved to him, to his intense astonishment, that he could dance as well as anybody, and, under the stimulus of the phonograph, polished off a facet of him that nobody had dreamed existed.

Celia's line, of course, was good-humored amusement, and she would, she felt, have been irretrievably shamed had any one discovered, especially had her husband discovered, the true emotions her manner masked. But she could no more help feeling those sharp stabs of pain than she could have resisted the neuralgic twinges of a bad tooth. Jeal-

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ousy was not the only feeling, either, that shook and gripped and dismayed her.

So, from whatever motive you like to name it (she tried hard not to name it cowardice), she clung to the thing that had once not been a mask—the cool aloofness, the fastidiousness, the kindly affectionate superiority; went on pointing out, with humorous tolerance, his little mistakes; maintained the position which he had once so eagerly acquiesced in and had never tried to change, that her duty toward him was to refine and civilize him; induce him to appreciate the value of the ornamental and frivolous aspects of life; get him suppler—more, as she used to say, human.

There had come within the last few months, and within a year of their marriage, a change in him which made this attitude of hers all the harder to maintain. Something seemed to be undermining that quiet confidence in himself which, when she had first met him, had been his most distinguishing characteristic. She knew, of course, that he had business worries, due to the conditions created by

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the outbreak of the war. But then, the war had affected everybody. All their friends groaned and joked about their poverty; affected an extravagant ignorance as to where their next meal was coming from. But they all went on living, as far as she could see, in just about the same old way.

There was no reason to suppose that Fred was any harder hit than the others. Indeed, he talked very much less about hard times than the other men did. He had, two or three times lately, looked pretty solemn over bills, to be sure; had asked, with no jocular undertone, how much she'd paid for that rose-colored evening frock, and had made a queer noise like an audible shudder, over an offhand remark of hers about the possibility of trading in their car for a this year's model.

That she had not taken any of these signs more seriously was due to the fact that she supposed all husbands made themselves unpleasant on the subject of domestic expenditure. Her married friends of longer standing seemed to accept this convention quite light-heartedly, and burlesqued a lively terror

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over the effect of all of their more ornamental purchases on their respective husbands. Besides, Celia knew she wasn't extravagant, really. It couldn't be that that plunged her husband into the brooding melancholy that seemed to envelop him whenever circumstances gave it a chance.

But this belief, quite honestly achieved, didn't help her much; because the melancholy was there. Many a time she'd surprised a haggard look, almost a despairing look, in his eyes, that all but brought the tears to her own. And the impulse that came to get her arms around him tight, to demand to be told what the trouble was—all about it clear down to the bottom, would be almost irresistible. But the fear of losing her own self-control, going to pieces, crying, making a damp, unpleasant little fool of herself, always restrained her—had up to to-night at any rate. She'd always stiffened against it. In order not to go soft, she'd become brusque—bullied him a little, urged him to cheer up, dragged him off to the theater or a four of bridge with the Calvins around the corner.

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Like all situations between intimates, this between them was a product of a thousand small accretions. Had he come home six months ago with the look she'd seen in his face to-night, her wall of resistance would have been shattered. The troubled flood of compassion pent up within her would have engulfed him. But he wasn't so very different to-night from what he had been this morning, or a week ago; not so different but that she could turn back to the face in the mirror, after telling him to run along, and go on with the minor improvements in it, just as she had been doing when she heard his latch-key.

Only she eyed that mirrored face now with a hard alertness, as an old sergeant-major might watch a recruit turning blue under fire, daring the eyes to brim, or the lips to tremble. Her hands began trembling and she gripped them together fiercely, then slackened their clasp and set them to work again.

When Marie, the maid, came up-stairs to hook up the rose-colored gown, the voice in which Celia

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questioned her as to the state of preparedness in the dining-room sounded remote and small to her own ears, though to Marie herself, so far as one could tell, it sounded natural enough.

She stirred sharply—a movement like anger—when she heard her husband come out of his room and walk steadily down the stairs, without pausing at her now closed door for a word. It was not the omission that made her angry, but the sharp contraction of her own heart that it caused—the lump that it brought in her throat.

CHAPTER II

THE INSULT

IT was eleven o'clock that night before she saw him again, except in the presence of their guests. And during all those hours, whenever her gaze rested upon her husband's face, and whenever his voice came clearly to her ears in a lull of the voices of the others, heart and throat felt that same clutch followed by the same dull sense of outrage that this should be so. And all the while her voice went on sounding small and far away, and her smile felt stiff.

As a matter of objective fact, she knew that she was in good form. Howard Collier, at her right, being a comparative stranger, did not offer, perhaps, a fair test of her powers. He'd probably have been more or less impressed anyway. But that Carter Worthing, on her left—Carter, the town

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bachelor, who, on coming into his inheritance fifteen years ago, had quit work and devoted himself to the graceful evasion of matrimony—that he should betray an uneasy preoccupation with what she was saying to Howard Collier, while Martha Walters, at his left, was trying her prettiest to flirt with him, and should fairly snatch at the smallest straw of an opportunity to turn back to her, was an indication worth paying attention to.

But the recognition of this fact brought her none of the mild cool elation she'd naturally have felt. It hardened, excited—almost exasperated her. It was, perhaps, responsible for the attitude she took when the topic they were all discussing these days came up, the Grahams' divorce. Perhaps, too, it led her to put edge enough into her voice so that all the table stopped to listen, and presently joined in.

“Oh, I'm not on his side,” she said. “I never liked George Graham very well, and hardly knew him at all, anyway. But I don't see what there is to get so excited about. Three years ago, when

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he married her, Dora Graham was a raving beauty. Look at her now! I don't think it's so very surprising, what he did."

Two or three voices took issue with her simultaneously. What was the "for better, for worse" clause in the marriage service for, if not to cover such a case? Did she seriously mean to say (this rather solemnly from Carter) that a wife's loss of her beauty justified her husband in being unfaithful to her?

Celia said no, she didn't mean that, of course. "But Dora—why Dora *was* her looks, and her looks were Dora. That's what George Graham married. Everybody knew it. Dora knew it. She wasn't like an ordinary pretty girl. She was a professional beauty, really. She never pretended to know anything. She never tried to amuse people. She knew she needn't bother to. She might have been a picture on the wall. Well, I don't say it's her fault that she's lost all that. But certainly it isn't his. And she just isn't the person he married, that's all."

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It was an outrageous line to take, she knew. She'd seized upon it to satisfy a need in her, which she didn't understand, for something hard and cold and metallic like that. And what she said wouldn't have mattered, had it been engulfed, as she'd expected it to be, in the confusion of dinner-table chatter.

Instead of that, to her consternation, her words were followed, and pointed, somehow, by a moment of dead silence in which they veritably seemed to echo. Something inexplicably kept her from looking across at her husband. And the panicky realization—inexplicably, also—seized her, that if she didn't look out, she'd cry, right there, before them all—make a scene. She, of all people!

She flashed round on Carter Worthing. "Oh, don't be so *solemn*," she commanded under her breath. "Say something silly. It's your turn."

She couldn't have told afterward whether he had obeyed her or not. But from some quarter or other the talk started again. She got her breath once more. The momentary panic passed. But she felt

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curiously limp all the rest of the evening, and not once did she meet Fred's eye.

It was with a mixture of relief and dread that she saw her party beginning to break up. The relief was the stronger, until the front door had closed for the last time. But when it did, she had a wild impulse to rush out and call back that last pair of guests.

When Fred came back into the drawing-room, and she tried to speak to him, her teeth were chattering. What she said was quite casual, though, and her voice matched it.

"Did Howard Collier tell you," she asked, "that they're thinking of coming out here for a year, if they can get a house that's what they want?"

He said, "I don't know. Yes, I think he did."

His own voice was absent—level—lifeless again, just as it had been before she sent him away to dress, and he turned from her and leaned an elbow on the mantelpiece.

A frantic exasperation took her, but it hid, for a moment, behind a patient sigh and the statement

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that since she was very tired she thought she would go to bed. But, against her will, almost—certainly against her judgment, she added as she moved toward the door, "I just can't stand that dead-alive voice and way of yours any more, Fred. I'm sorry, but I can't. I can't *stand* it!"

At that he rounded upon her. "You'll have to for a while, I guess," he said, and to her horror, she saw his lips were trembling. His hands he plunged bruskiy into his pockets.

"Sit down," he commanded. "I've got some things to tell you."

The power of habit is a wonderful thing. Neither her voice, nor its inflection, nor the words she chose, afforded any indication of what was boiling within her.

She said evenly, "Oh, not to-night, Fred. You're tired and blue, and I'm all edges, somehow. There's no telling what might happen. And it's no good having a scene, when we might be getting a good night's sleep instead."

"A good night's sleep!" he repeated. "I wonder

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when I had one last. I've forgotten. Well—I'm through!"

She sat down more suddenly than was her wont in making such movements, gripped the arm of her chair, and gazed at him with an uncomprehending stare.

"Through!" she echoed. "Through with what?"

He jerked his hands from his pockets and flung them out in a frantic gesture.

"I'm through with this," he shouted. "With everything! With this damned hell I've been living in!" And then instantly, "I'm sorry. I beg your pardon. You're quite right not to like scenes. I'll try to do better. Here's the fact that concerns you. I'm broke—completely broke. I'm at the end of my string—the end, that's all."

She dropped back limply in her chair. "You mean your business is going to fail?" she said shakily. Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm—I'm terribly sorry, old man."

The words, especially the last phrase, hadn't quite the right ring. That was inevitable. Be-

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cause, the terrible pang that had gripped her when he shouted that he was through, had been the belief that he meant he was through with her—couldn't endure her any longer—had fallen in love with some one else. It was not a reasonable belief. Just something that hurt intolerably.

On the other hand, business failures were phenomena that were likely to happen to anybody. She didn't precisely understand the nature of them, nor, to tell the truth, why they were taken so seriously. People went on somehow. Not quite the same for a while, but not so very differently. They gave up going south in the winter, perhaps. The women went about in cabs, instead of having a limousine of their own, and if one had a good memory, one remembered their frocks.

It would seem harder to face, no doubt, after that horrible alternative she had for a moment contemplated, was forgotten. But the thing to do with him just now was to get him quieted down; get him to realize that, after all, the pillars of the world hadn't fallen.

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But the passion that had caused his outbreak seemed already to have subsided. He went to the smoking-table, picked out a cigar—a big expensive cigar, at which he smiled in wry fashion—and lighted it.

“Do you care anything about details?” he asked. “Or will you just take the situation in a lump as it stands?”

“I’d like to hear about it, of course,” she said, “unless—unless, for to-night, you’d rather just forget about it.”

He echoed the word forget with a shiver, but immediately began with a good appearance of composure, telling her his story.

“I can’t see that it’s been my fault. There’s nothing, now I think back over it, that I could have done differently, unless I’d actually known how things were coming out. I haven’t taken any risks that weren’t the legitimate risks of my business. At least, not since I asked you to marry me. I did blow in fifteen thousand the year before that, on a regular wild-cat—one of those inventions that’s

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perfectly sure to make your everlasting fortune and never does. But I could afford to lose it then, and I figured the lesson I learned was cheap at the price.

“But that hasn’t anything to do with the situation I’m in now. The thing that’s really crippled me happened just after the war. I was half-way through that big Waters-Macdonald contract, when they went into bankruptcy as dry and clean as a lot of old bones. They’d have been on thin ice, I suppose, even without the war, but nobody suspected that. When that was cleaned up, I was out about a hundred thousand dollars, and there wasn’t any other business to get it back with. There was nothing doing in our line of work, of course, for months. The whole business was paralyzed—dead. But we all thought it was going to pick up soon and the thing to do seemed to be what everybody was doing, sit tight and wait for the squall to blow over. It meant paying out money all the time, of course, for no return at all, just the advantage of

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being there, ready to do business at the old stand when there should be some business to do.

"I got together all the money I could, mortgaged this house for what it would stand—you knew about that—and waited. Well, that's what I've been doing ever since. I've had a few good prospects to tease me along, but nothing—not one thing, do you understand, has ever come through. Over and over again, I've been the low bidder of half a dozen normal bids, and lost the job because somebody had made a mistake—gone wild, bid twenty or thirty per cent. too low.

"I suppose it's just my luck evening up. I used not to believe in luck. That was because mine was all good. When I saw men go to smash, I used to think that, somehow or other, it must be their own doing. Well, I know better now. Though I suppose there'll be plenty of people who'll have a reason for what happened to me, when they know about it. However—"

It rose to her lips to ask what the reason was,

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but she hesitated over the question. It couldn't be anything to do with her—could it?

At last he broke the silence. "There's nothing more to tell, really. I stood the siege as long as I could. It's a relief to have got to the end of it. I said I'd hang on to the very last day, and I have. This was it. It's been—hell, the waiting, the—hoping. Because, of course, every time the postman came in, every time the phone rang, it might be something. Only, it never was. I've been—half crazy lately. That accounts for the—manner you objected to. Well, it's over, thank God. I've got to the end."

"But—but," she stammered, "things don't end, Fred. They have to keep going somehow. You can't just—stop." Her face whitened then, and her mouth dropped open with blank horror, over the realization that there was a way by which a man could just stop. Was that what he meant?

She tried to hide her terror. "It can't be so bad as it looks to-night, Fred. There must be something you can do."



"Well, it's all over, thank God"

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"Get some more money somewhere, do you mean, to tide me over?"

She assented with a nod. "There must be ways."

"There's a way," he said. "My mother's little bit is all in my hands. I could take that, and if the luck changed within the next few months she need never know of it." He eyed her with a ferocious intentness as he made that suggestion.

She colored. "I meant possible ways," she said.

At that he turned away and begged her pardon. "There might be possible ways," he said, "one or two just possible." His voice dropped and dulled a little. "And I suppose if I wanted to take them, I would. But I don't. I've had all I can stand."

She pressed her knuckles against her lips as if that could still their trembling, and tried to gulp down the lump in her throat. The tears were brimming out of her eyes and trickling down her cheeks, but she thought nothing of that. After a while she managed to say:

"But—but what are you going to do, Fred?"

"I sold the car to-day," he informed her, "for

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enough to pay the couple of people I have kept at the office, and the rent I owed down there, and the telephone bill. They came to-day to take it out. I paid up, but told them to go ahead and take it. So there's the end of that."

"But *you!* What are you going to do?"

The words were a cry of undisguised terror that brought him around. He stood for a moment looking into her face.

"Oh, not that," he said. "Not what you're afraid of. I've treated you badly enough already, without that. It's bad enough at the best, of course, for you, but there'll be something. There's the house. The equity in that is worth something, if you can realize on it, and the furniture and so on. Perhaps—" He shook his head as if perplexed by some memory he couldn't quite get hold of. "Perhaps you could rent it furnished for enough to pay you. And your jewelry might help tide you over until—"

"Tide *me* over!" She squeezed the tears out of her eyes and stared at him. "Why are you talking

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about me? And—and what do you mean about having treated me badly already? Tell me that first.”

“Oh, that’s plain enough,” he said. “It ought to be plain enough to you. False pretenses—not up to specifications. It’s just as you were saying at dinner to-night. The man you married amounted to something—a comfortable, prosperous, solid and reliable sort of chap. Well, as you say, I’m not that man. That man’s finished. He’s gone, and I can’t play his game. It’s no use. I haven’t the nerve for it. I haven’t the sand. I’m good for twenty-five dollars a week, perhaps—thirty at most, over a drafting-table in some other chap’s office, and that lets me out. It’s rotten luck for you. I’m sorry about it. That’s why I was trying to figure out some way to make it easier. I’ll do anything I can—anything you want me to do. And you could rely on me not to do anything that would make it harder. You understand, don’t you?”

He was not looking at her while he spoke, but she, to make it impossible for him to do so, pulled

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her chair around so that she could lean both elbows on her spinet writing-desk.

"Yes," she said in a stifled voice, "I guess I do. I'm beginning to get the idea, I think." Her eyes were dry now and her cheeks were burning. "The idea was that the man I married was able to give me a house like this and all the clothes I wanted, and a motor, and so on. That was a part of the marriage service that the minister didn't read. But it was understood just the same.

"And because that was your contract, you wouldn't tell me how things were going with you, or ask me to economize. Because you never did—never, never—never once, so that I understood that you meant anything by it. Why, you didn't even joke about being poor now on account of the war, the way the others did. That was your way of living up to—specifications, I suppose you'd say. You just let me go right up to the very last day—the day when they came to take the telephone. Oh! And then you tell me it's over.

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“And now, if I understand what you’ve been saying, you’re showing me how I can pick up what’s left out of the wreckage and scuttle back home to father and mother and—and—this was what you meant about doing anything I wanted—that I should get a divorce from you on some pretext that you’d furnish me with, and—and try my luck again. And—and the jewelry would tide me over until I could find somebody else who’d meet the requirements.”

There was a silence of minutes after that. He stirred two or three times as if he meant to speak, but gave it up. Her way of putting the thing made it impossible for him to admit that she had taken his meaning correctly, but the essential truth of what she had said prevented his denying it.

Presently she began to cry, put her head down on her arms and sobbed and shook. He sat frozen in his chair at the other end of the room. He didn’t dare come near her. He couldn’t think of a word to say. After a while—a period of time that

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seemed endless to him—she sat erect again, dried her wet face and began getting control of her breathing.

The first thing she managed to say was, "I'm sorry to be such a mess. If anything's silly to do, it's to cry. But—but an insult like that makes you so sick you can't help yourself."

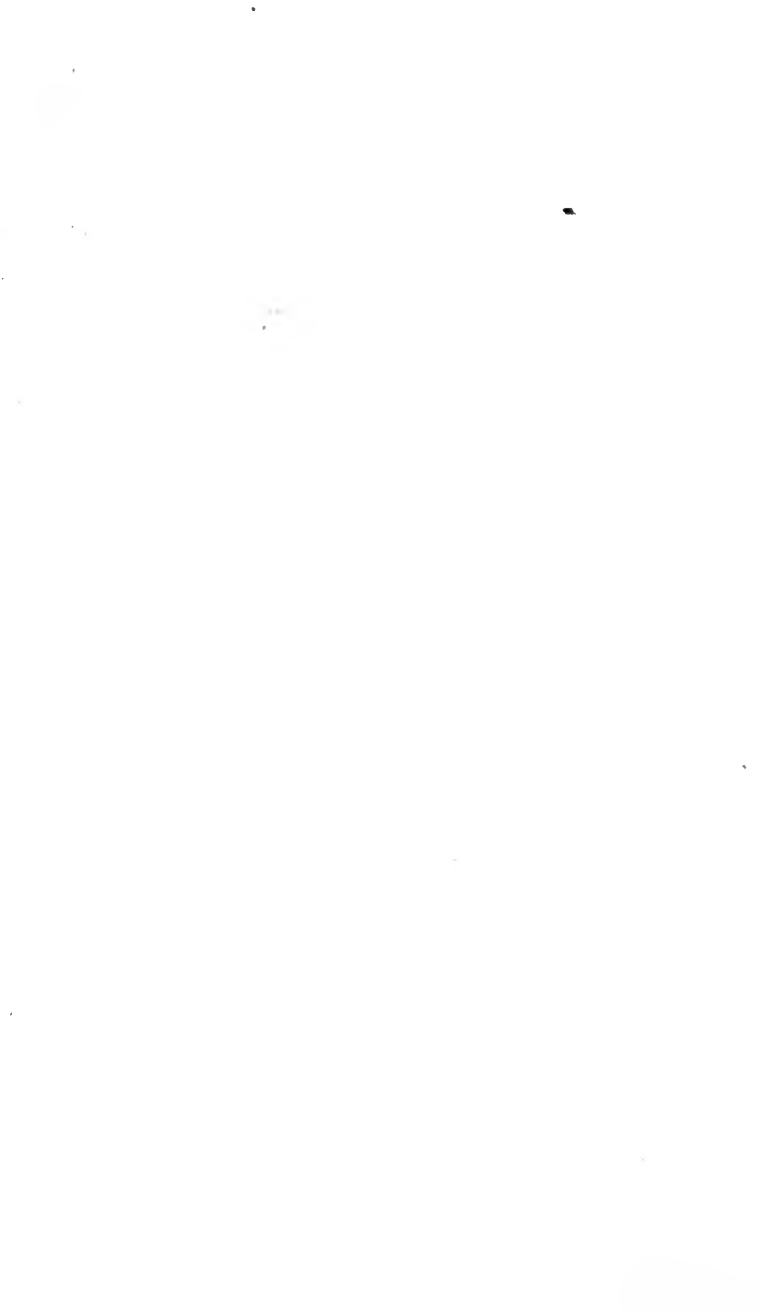
He cried out at that. "Celia, I didn't mean it for an insult."

She choked down another miserable sob and answered. "I know it. That's what makes it so perfectly unendurable. If you'd said it because you were—angry with me and w-wanted to hurt me just as hard as you possibly c-could, it wouldn't be so bad. But you really m-mean it. That's what you th-think I am. That's what you've thought ever since you married me. I suppose I ought to be glad I found out at last."

He got out of his chair and there was another long silence while he walked slowly back and forth the length of the room, sometimes with his hands in his pockets, sometimes getting them out and



She put her head down on her arms and sobbed. He sat frozen in his chair



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squeezing them together, sometimes pausing to look at her where she sat with her back to him, drooping over the little spinet desk (making a wonderfully appealing picture with her rose-colored frock of the new old-fashioned cut, her gay colors and her woe-begone air) and then moving on again. Any one watching him could have seen that a momentous question was struggling within him trying to get itself asked. It is possible that Celia, without looking at him at all, was aware of this.

It broke through at last. He said unevenly, "Celia, do you mean that you're still fond of me without—without any of the things that were a part of me when we were married? And that you won't mind coming down to twenty-five dollars a week with me? Is that what you mean?"

She flushed, straightened, whipped round on him in a gale of wrath. "Mind!" she said. "Of course I mind. I mind horribly. I hate it. Poverty's not romantic, and it's not a lark, and there's nothing nice about it, and the virtuous, superior way people act about it makes me tired—pretending they like

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it, pretending they wouldn't change things if they could. I notice they do change pretty quickly when they can."

She went on to say a good deal more than that of the same import. She talked about the horror of three-room flats "out on the West Side somewhere!" She dwelt upon the terrors of makeshift home-made furniture with cretonne tacked on around it, the dismal results of fifty-cent-a-day cookery out of the back pages of domestic magazines. She brought out the fact that these trials were much less unbearable in the cases of certain of her friends who had at least assumed them with their eyes open. But to be asked if she'd "mind" going and living like that, as the result of an ignominious smash which she, ludicrously and intolerably, hadn't seen until it was about her ears—! In short, in her tempest of anger, she whipped and cut him where and how she could, and had him looking pretty white and sick before she got through.

He might have drawn a favorable augury from

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all this, but it isn't wonderful that he did not. He failed to remark, in the first place, that she had left the first half of his question unanswered—the question whether or not she really was in love with him, himself, rather than with the contented and prosperous citizen he had ceased to be. And, while he saw that she was trying frantically to hurt him, to draw blood wherever she could, snatching at any stinging phrase that would serve her purpose, he was unable to make the simple deduction from this fact that unless she were in love with him—very much in love with him—the exercise would have afforded her no satisfaction. She'd have been concerned with her own feelings, not his.

Her words stumbled at last over a big sob and she pulled up short, visibly got herself in hand, and said very deliberately:

“What you said was, wasn't it, that you'd do anything you could—anything I wanted you to? I mean, as far as I was concerned?”

He nodded, but, as she wasn't looking at him, he had to speak. It took a struggle to get the words

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out of his stiff throat, but he finally managed, "Yes, that's what I said."

"And you mean it?" she asked. "You'll do it? That's a serious promise?"

"Yes," he said. "What is it that you want me to do?"

She told him to wait a minute, she wanted to think. It was with a question that she began, and the nature of it startled him into a staring speechlessness, so that she had to ask it two or three times.

"Can you really get that job you were talking about, twenty-five dollars a week or so—at a drafting-table, I think you said? I mean, can you count on it, as much as that a week?"

Finally he roused himself enough to say, "Yes, I guess so."

She hesitated over her next question, drew herself up a little more defiantly erect, and made sure she had command of a steady glance and a coldly remote tone before she asked.

"If a man and his wife were going to live on

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that, how much rent could they afford to pay for a flat? They'd live in a flat, wouldn't they? It would be cheaper than a boarding-house? If she did all the work herself—of course?"

"Celia!" he cried. "You mean—?"

"Answer my question," she commanded furiously. She was furious because she had to look away from him after all. "Would they have a small flat, I mean, instead of a boarding-house?"

"Yes," he said raggedly, "they would. And they could pay about twenty-five dollars a month for it." Then he came up behind her, not touching her, but leaning close, one hand on the chair-back, the other on the desk beside her. Even so she could feel that he was trembling, and she had a giddy, irrational, terrifying impulse to fling her arms around him—around whatever of him was within reach, and press her face against him and cry.

"Do you mean—?" he asked. "Celia, do you mean that you're going to do it? Going to see it through with me in spite of everything?"

She flashed from the chair to her feet and backed

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away from him. She couldn't see him for the infuriating tears that kept welling over and spilling down her cheeks.

"Of course I mean it," she said. "What else is there that I can do? It's—it's not because I'm f-fond of you. It's because I want to show you what an—what an insufferable insult that was."

As he gazed at her now, the blood began to come back into his cheeks, his breathing quickened, he clenched his hands. He realized now that part of his question had not been answered.

"But if you weren't fond of me—" he stammered. "You are, aren't you, even if I am no good?"

"I was," she flung at him furiously, "I was—p-perfectly idiotic about you, until I found tonight how you'd been thinking about me all the time—what sort of a person you thought I was. You've been hating me, thinking it was all my fault, and feeling very noble because you never complained. Well, I'm going to show you. You won't like it. You'll wish I'd gone scuttling back

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to mother and lived on my jewelry, and left you free to think what a—what a vampire I was. Well, I'm not going to let you do it.

"You've promised to do whatever I wanted, and that's it. You go and get your job, while I'm finding a flat. Then we'll see."

This spirited rear-guard action sufficed to cover her retreat. She eyed him steadily. There was no longer about his look the suggestion that in another second he might laugh and cry all at once, and hug her up in his arms and demolish her. He was harmless now, for half a minute at least—the half-minute she needed.

"I think if you don't mind, I'll go to bed," she announced politely, and left him.

Probably she needn't have locked her door, but she did, with a good defiant click she hoped he heard. Then she went over to her glass and took a look at herself. The tumbled, tear-wet, panting object she saw there was another creature from the last Celia she'd seen. That fine, smooth, unruffled surface she'd always guarded so carefully, was a

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rag—a mop. Celia allowed herself to laugh at it—a dangerous thing to do, because the laugh choked in mid-career; the tears came up again. She shot a last look of defiance into the mirror—she did not care—and let go. She laid her face down on her bare arms and cried to her heart's content.

CHAPTER III

THE MORNING AFTER

AFTER five or six hours of the solidest sleep he had enjoyed in weeks, Alfred Blair came wide awake all at once and set himself to wrestling with the new factors in his situation, those that Celia's unexpected attitude and unprecedented display of emotion last night had forced upon him.

He realized that the things women say in moments of emotional stress do not always represent their considered opinions. Celia's avowal, for example, that she had been fond of him—"perfectly idiotic about him"—up to the moment of what she had spoken of as his insult last night, might have been snatched merely as an effective background to set off the insult itself in more lurid colors.

But there could be no doubt that she felt strongly about the matter. She was not indifferent to him. Chivalrously as he had meant it, he could see now

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that his suggestion of a willingness to furnish her with a pretext for getting rid of him altogether, right on the heels of his confession of his financial downfall, had been inconsiderate—even brutal. It occurred to him that a clever, unscrupulous man, who wanted to goad his wife into the acceptance of his fallen fortunes with him could hardly have adopted more skilful tactics; granted, that is, that he had the unmerited luck to be married to a little thoroughbred like Celia.

He felt terribly contrite about it. His memories of the evening convicted him of about all the crimes in the husband's calendar. He had sworn at her, bellowed at her, made her cry, for the first time, so far as he knew, since they had been married. He had infuriated her into the resolution to share his poverty on a putative twenty-five dollars a week; into binding herself to it by means of that promise of his that he would assent to any plan for their future which she might propose.

Well, it was now up to him to get her out of that. Tact was called for, clearly—self-control.

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He must let her see that his happiness was bound up in hers; that for her to go back to her father and mother and to what comfort and independence might be derived from the salvage of his shattered fortune involved no disloyalty to him; would be an act, indeed, of the deepest consideration for him. And, if she wanted to wait for him, there might arrive a day when he could come back to her, bringing, as it were, his sheaves with him—a new, perhaps ampler, crop of sheaves.

He talked it all out with her three or four times, trying out different lines of reasoning. And, inasmuch as he provided her half of the conversation as well as his own, they all came out satisfactorily.

Over the breakfast table, naturally enough, it was a different story. Celia ruined his opening by being already seated behind the percolator when he came into the dining-room; by being dressed, unprecedentedly, in a very businesslike looking skirt and blouse; by having obliterated from her looks and air every trace of the ravages wrought by last night's tempest. She was further fortified

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with a quantity of crisp directions for the maid which, while they did not keep her constantly in the dining-room during the first ten minutes after he came down, kept her imminent, so that there was no chance to say anything.

And then, suddenly, with a "That's all" to the maid, Celia took the game into her own hands.

"The Colliers really want a house," she said, "and they acted last night as if they liked this. So, if you think the best thing to do with it is to rent it furnished, we'd better try to get them—hadn't we—to-day?"

It is always terribly hard to go on across a breakfast table from where one left off the night before. There is something so intensely prosaic and matter-of-fact about the meal and its surroundings that drastic decisions—any projects which contemplate a break in the daily routine, are likely to appear fantastic.

He managed something, not meeting her eye, about sticking it out another month.

But her reply came cleanly back. "Not a minute

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after we can get away. Even if you could stand it, I couldn't."

She was so clearly right about this that he yielded at once. He knew he couldn't stand it either. And this initial victory of hers gave her command of the situation. He never had a chance after that. He owned that the Colliers presented an opportunity not to be thrown away. A forced sale always meant a terrible sacrifice. The rental, at any sort of reasonable figure, would meet the interest charges on the mortgage, the taxes and so on; would pay off in the course of a few months their local bills, and would provide, after these demands had been satisfied, a steady little income, which would come in handy, he concluded, in any case.

"In any case" was meant as an entering wedge—a way of saying that a part, at least, of the program he had suggested last night, was still open to her. She could go back to her father and mother and wait for him.

But the very intent look which the phrase drew

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from her, though it invited an explanation of what he meant by that, paralyzed his resolution. She so very clearly was waiting with an ax for that idea to thrust out its head.

He looked out the window and said he'd try to see Collier some time to-day.

"Would you mind leaving that to me?" she asked. Though in all but form, the request was a command. "I can see Ruth this morning and I think I can make a better bargain with her than you could with Howard." Then she flushed up a little and added, "That isn't the real reason. I want to tell her my own story about why we're doing it.

"I'm going to tell her," she went on, with a rush, "that you're all worn out, on the edge of a bad breakdown, and that I'm going to take you away west somewhere—and that'll be true, because the West Side's west, and I shan't tell her how far—before it gets any worse."

"Is it your idea," he asked stiffly, for the thing hurt him dreadfully, "that we can disappear under

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cover of a story like that, and that no one will find out about the—disgrace that happened to us? If it is, I can tell you now that it won't work. There are a hundred ways for the facts to get out, even supposing I could slink about the streets downtown without encountering anybody."

"I don't expect it not to come out," she said. "But the story I was going to tell Ruth would give me a chance to get away before they knew—"

"The disgraceful truth," he put in.

She flung the phrase back at him. "Exactly. The disgraceful truth that I never knew, never suspected a thing, until the actual moment of the smash. That shows such a ghastly lot. Well, I want to get away before they can put two and two together. And I want to do it in such a way that they'll understand I don't want to be followed up and dropped in on and taken for charity rides in their motor-cars. I want it fixed so that if they do see me, they'll have to pretend they don't." And then, most unfairly, she stepped on the buzzer and summoned the maid.

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Between that act and the opening of the service-door, she got herself in hand again, recovered her tottering poise, and was able to say in parenthesis, between two factitious directions to Marie, "Of course you can go to Howard yourself, if you'd rather I didn't see Ruth."

He said into his coffee-cup, "No, that's all right."

He'd have said right then, if interrogated, that she had hurt and angered and humiliated him as far as she could. The maneuver of summoning the maid, the way she had phrased and timed her offer not to go to Ruth at all, in such a manner as to remind him that he had promised the night before to assent to anything she wanted; and to make it impossible for him to reply except by a categorical Yes or No, was, he'd have said, the last arrow in her quiver. It proved, however, that she had one more.

She rose from the table when he did, and he saw that she had a package in her hand—must have had it in her lap during the whole of the meal, a pack-

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age whose solidly rectangular form was but indifferently disguised by the bunglesome job she had made of wrapping it up.

He looked hastily away from it after one glance, and said:

"I can't promise to get that job to-day, of course. But I'll do my best."

"You might call me up this afternoon, if you have any luck," she suggested. "Then I can tell you how I've come out with Ruth about renting the house. You and Howard will have to settle up the details, of course."

He said he supposed so, and with a nod of farewell, which, in his state of mind was the only leave-taking he dared attempt, he turned to leave the room.

She called him back. "Here's something, Fred," she said in a tight little voice, "for you." She held the package out to him.

He knew what it contained well enough, as the dark flush that came up into his face, and the absurdly overacted casualness of his manner of say-

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ing, "Oh, what is it?" made evident, no doubt, to her. Also, he backed away a little as he spoke, and, further to secure his hands from the necessity of taking the package from her, he put them in his pockets.

She reddened, too, and said, "It's the pearls and the other things, everything—practically. What you were telling me last night I could live on — while I was waiting for somebody else to turn up."

Thereupon ensued what I can only characterize as a row—a rowdy row at that, concerning the details of which I feel it my duty, as a self-respecting chronicler, to maintain a decent reticence. The major tactics of the battle, however, may be indicated.

He announced very forcibly that he would have nothing to do with her jewels beyond acting as her agent for the disposal of them. If she chose, in spite of her avowed belief in his business incompetence, to entrust the job of selling them to him,

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he would make the best bargain he could, and have the jeweler mail the check direct to her. She announced a passionate indifference as to what he did with them, provided only that she should never be asked to look at them again, or accept, or hear anything about, the proceeds of their sale. It is perhaps not fair to say that she flung the package on the floor. She propelled it vigorously in his direction, and he declined to accept it, the law of gravitation operating in the usual manner. He suggested the ash-barrel as a proper receptacle, and she, by implication, agreed with him.

When they parted, she for her room, and he for the seven-fifty-three train, about the most one can say for them is that he hadn't actually shaken her, nor she literally slapped him. Short of that, neither of them had left anything undone to provoke and justify the fury of the other.

The wrath of a kindly, slow-tempered man, once it is heated up to the point of incandescence, is a much hotter thing than any emotion that a quick-

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tempered man or woman can experience. Celia herself would have been horrified could she have known the temperature of her husband's.

All the way to town in the train, behind the shelter of his newspaper, he seethed like molten steel. The last look of helpless fury he had seen in Celia's face, and the tears that stained it, were his only source of satisfaction. He had given as good as he got in that last five minutes, anyway. He wished he had begun sooner. He was sorry, on the whole, he hadn't shaken her.

But the episode of the jewelry was more or less satisfactory. The injury, which acted as a blow-pipe to keep his wrath from cooling, was the thing that had happened before that—her avowal of the story she meant to tell Ruth Collier about his nervous breakdown and her intention to take him "west somewhere"; her admission that she felt herself disgraced by his failure, to the point where nothing but their severance of all ties connecting with the old life, their total disappearance like a pair of absconding criminals, would satisfy her. That

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rankled frightfully. He didn't know whether it was more maddening to believe that she really meant it, or that she had said it merely in the hope of wounding him as deeply as possible. He tried out each of these theories, with the idea of discovering which infuriated him the worse, and at last, although they were mutually contradictory, compromised by adopting them both.

It was not until the train pulled into the terminal station and imposed on him the necessity of deciding what he'd do next that he regretfully clamped down the lid upon this pot and, as it were, took it off the fire. A real rage like that was an unaccustomed luxury to Alfred Blair.

But he must now turn his mind to more practical matters. He had come to town to look for a job, and he must find one before he again confronted Celia. The notion of going back to her to-night and by confessing the failure of his quest, give her a chance to drop the acid of pity into his wounds, was intolerable.

He realized now that he ought to have spent

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those waking hours before he came down to breakfast to better advantage than in sentimental maundings about his wife. He ought to have laid out a plan of campaign. When he had said, last night, that all he was good for now was twenty-five dollars a week or so over a drafting-board, he'd expressed an emotion rather than a thought-out plan. And even when she'd pressed him as to whether he could get a job at that, he'd answered, "Yes, I guess so," with only half his mind. Surely any one of his former competitors would see that he was worth that. But now that it was no longer a case for emotions or oratory, simply a question of picking out one of those former competitors, going to him and asking for a job, it wasn't so easy.

It had been one thing to tell Celia, last night, that he was at the end of his rope; that he had lost his nerve, and that all he was good for was a routine job. It would be another thing to go into the office of a man who still regarded him as a potentially formidable rival and say so.

This unexpected flare-up of pride, of pride

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hardly to be differentiated from Celia's own, disconcerted him frightfully. It was with an indescribable wrench that he realized how much easier it would be to apply to a stranger who knew nothing of his business history and need be told nothing of it, for any sort of job—street-sweeping, coal-shoveling—than to submit himself to the half-kindly contempt of an inhabitant of his own world. He tried to charge this feeling up to Celia's account and make himself believe that he would not have felt that way had she not expressed a similar feeling, but he couldn't manage it.

It was without any objective at all that he finally walked out of the station and turned up the street. His dread of going with his story to any one who knew him became absolutely inhibitory the moment he fixed on any one in particular, and the reflection came to him as a real relief at last, that such an errand wouldn't do any good anyway.

What would have been his own attitude, a year ago, to such a request? Supposing, for example, that John Abercrombie had come to him like that,

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said he was down and out and wanted a twenty-five-dollar job? He'd have said to himself, "Here! If this man is really down and out, he's dear at any price. He won't be much good at first, and he'll get steadily worse, and I'll be saddled with him. But if, as is more likely, he comes back, then he'll leave me and go in for himself again at the end of six months or so, with all the inside dope of my office at his finger-tips, twice as dangerous a competitor as before."

No, he knew what he'd say to Abercrombie in these circumstances. He'd say, in the most optimistic manner he could manage, along with a clap on the shoulder, and the offer of a cigar, "Look here, old man. You're tired out, and you've got a touch of liver. You forget your troubles for a while and take a good rest. Go down to French Lick or somewhere, and boil out. You will be back again in three months, fit to give any of us a run for our money. But this twenty-five-dollar-a-week stuff—forget it." And that, as sure as to-morrow's sun-

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rise, was what Abercrombie would say to him to-day.

He'd been wandering aimlessly along all the while, stopping every now and then to stare down into a building excavation, or to watch an automobile with a balky motor trying to start. Now his eye was caught by a spectacle almost as familiar to Chicagoans—the long file of men waiting outside one of the afternoon newspaper offices for the first edition, in order that they might be the first applicants for the jobs advertised in its "Want" columns. The length of that file is a pretty good barometer to business conditions, but, good times or bad, it is always there. And Alfred Blair, without any reflection at all, just because there it was, and here he was, dropped into place at the tail of it.

Four hours or so later, a torn-out bit of newspaper ready for reference in his overcoat pocket, he was conducted by an office boy through the indescribable confusion of a big, dirty, resonant room, with a lot of drafting-tables in it, many of them

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unoccupied, to a desk in the corner, where sat a lank, oily-looking man in his shirt-sleeves.

To him, Alfred Blair said, "I am answering your advertisement for a draftsman."

The oily man was just back from lunch, and still, with the aid of a tooth-pick, ruminant over it. He was modeling his manners, as well as he could, on those of the head of the firm, who had just cashed in on his loyalty to the new city administration, with a fat municipal contract.

The superintendent had been having his troubles, it must be owned. There were many other loyal souls coming around to be taken care of. But a few men had to be found somewhere who knew their business. It was this fact that had led to the insertion of the advertisement.

The superintendent took two minutes, perhaps, for a searching and hostile stare at this surprising applicant. What business had a man in his situation to wear clothes like that?

He asked at last, out of one side of his mouth, "What experience have you had?"



"I am answering your advertisement for a draftsman"

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"I'm a competent draftsman," Blair said. "I can do anything you want me to."

"Where'd you work last?"

Blair said, deliberately, "I don't care to give any references."

The superintendent smiled—a sneering sort of smile that expressed, however, real pleasure. The admission restored him to a sense of his own superiority.

"I suppose you're a booze-fighter," he said behind a yawn, "but that makes no odds to me, if you can deliver the goods. There's about six weeks' or two months' work. Take off your coat and sit down over there. If you're any good, you've got a job. Twenty a week."

"I've got to have twenty-five," Blair said.

The superintendent waved his hand. "Nothing doing." But, as Blair turned away, he said, "Twenty-two fifty."

"All right," Celia's husband agreed.

It was not until half past five that he had an opportunity to telephone Celia from a nickel phone

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in a down-town drug-store. In a more observant mood he might have noted that his ring was answered almost instantly, and by Celia herself, as if she had been waiting there at her desk for it.

Also, his ear might have detected a change in the quality of her voice between her first "Hello! What is it?" and when she spoke after he'd laconically told her he'd got a job.

"It's only twenty-two fifty a week, I'm sorry to say," he added, "instead of the twenty-five I agreed to get."

"All right. I won't pay more than twenty a month for the flat." She added, "I've rented the house to the Colliers for two hundred. I'm to call Ruth up again and tell her if you say it's all right."

"It's quite all right as far as I'm concerned, of course," he said. "That matter's in your hands."

He didn't know whether the unclassifiable sound he heard just then came from Celia or was inserted in the conversation by the telephone company. She asked clearly enough the next moment, if he were coming home to dinner.

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"No," he said. "I shall be at the office until late—my old office—packing up."

At that she said abruptly, "Good-by."

It had been a ghastly day for Celia. Months afterward, when she could look back on the episode as a whole, she sometimes tried, idly, to decide which of those nightmare days was the worse—this, or its successor. Oftenest she concluded that this one was. The thing that gave it its peculiar horror was the fact that, on the surface, it was so like an ordinary day; the maids coming to her for their routine instructions, the housework going on, people calling her up and asking her to do amusing things, just as though she were still the secure, imperturbable, unruffled Celia she had been yesterday, and that she had still to seem to-day.

She called up Ruth Collier as early as was decent in the morning, and told her, as she had declared to Fred she would, that they'd decided overnight to go away. He was frightfully tired, hadn't been sleeping, was on the edge of a bad smash, and before it came, they were going to bolt.

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“Oh, we don’t know where. Disappear somewhere for a good long while—a year, maybe. And—this is why I’m telling you about it—we want you to take our house. You really are looking for one, aren’t you? Well, then, come out to-day and look at this with that idea. About noon? Oh, then you will stop for lunch. That’ll be fine. Just the two of us.”

She could make her voice sound all right, anyhow, that was one comfort. She was sure from the way Ruth talked she had suspected nothing over the phone. But whether the resources of her toilet-table were going to prove sufficient to obliterate from her face the traces of last night’s and this morning’s tempests, she wasn’t so sure. She went to work, deliberately and methodically, to produce this result.

All the while, she nursed her wrath against her husband, as one nurses a dying fire. It was her one defense against him—the one thing that would enable her to see the day through. If ever she got to feeling sorry for him, to thinking about that

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haggard beaten look she had seen in his face last night, she knew she was lost. She'd carried her jewel-box, still in its cumbersome wrapper, to her room, and whenever necessary, she glanced at it. It always worked.

Half an hour before Ruth's expected arrival the cook brought in word that a man was at the kitchen door asking permission to do any sort of odd job for a meal. It was a common sort of occurrence. But to-day it stabbed her with an almost intolerable pang—the thought that her husband was to-day, at this very moment, perhaps, doing the same thing, knocking at strange inhospitable doors, asking for work.

Anger flared up again, though, and saved her. It wasn't her fault, was it, that he had assumed that her interest in him was wholly mercenary, and had gone on keeping her in ignorance of the true state of affairs until it had come to this? It was not. So, though she toppled for an instant on the verge of an emotional abyss, she managed to keep her balance. She managed to maintain it, too, with-

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out a break, during the two hours and a half that her guest and prospective tenant stayed.

While she could do the talking herself it was comparatively easy—phrases just cool enough, indifferent enough, frivolously humorous enough, came readily to her lips, even while she went through the mockery of speculating about what she and Fred would do with their year's vacation, chatting about California and Honolulu. But while Ruth talked, she couldn't keep her mind on the things her guest was saying. It would bolt freakishly in unexpected directions, flash terrifying possibilities before her eyes, stab her with memories, and she would frantically summon her anger to the rescue and repel these assaults.

After Ruth had gone, she tried to pack. There was an immense lot of work to do, of course, getting things out of the way and putting the house in shape for the reception of its new occupants. But she didn't make much headway—couldn't give her mind to it. It was focused on the telephone, and that focus kept getting sharper and sharper

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all the time. He'd said he'd call up in the afternoon to let her know what luck he'd had. Evidently he hadn't got his job yet. Suppose, in his discouragement and despair, he decided that it wasn't worth trying to get. By half past five, when he did call up, she was about at the end of her endurance.

But his way of telling her just the bare facts and nothing more, his infuriating apology for having accepted twenty-two fifty, when he'd told her he'd get twenty-five, and the way he'd washed his hands of her bargain with the Colliers, toned her up once more—gave her a good warm glow of anger to go to work on. She was glad he wasn't coming home to dinner. She wouldn't see him again, if it were possible. She'd have no communication with him, except what was absolutely indispensable, until she could confront him in the new home his contemptuous disbelief in her had reduced them to.

He disconcerted her a little, though she didn't admit it to herself, by apparently wanting the same

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thing she did—making no effort, at any rate, to see her. He made her heart jump by pausing an instant outside her door—it wasn't locked—when he came home very late that night, but he went on, without a word, to his own room. He'd already left for town when she came down-stairs the next morning, and this program was repeated for two days more. They communicated with each other by leaving notes about—politely laconic notes, which they fancied Marie wouldn't see anything wrong with. Though why Marie should matter, it would be hard to say, since she, along with the cook, had had her notice and her two weeks' pay, and was leaving Saturday morning when the Colliers were coming in.

CHAPTER IV

EXPLORATION

IT was on Wednesday that Alfred got his job, and that Ruth Collier came out to lunch and agreed to take the house. On Thursday morning—not more than an hour after her husband's departure, Celia herself set out, on a very inadequate breakfast, and in very inadequate shoes, to find a flat that could be rented for not more than twenty dollars a month.

She had been vague as to what methods she should pursue toward this result, until, coming down-stairs to get her coffee, she had happened upon Marie carrying off the last night's paper that Alfred had brought home. She had never made use of classified advertising; had always thought of it merely as something that added an irritating bulk to the newspapers she occasionally read. But a

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memory of the legend—Flats to rent—at the head of interminable columns of fine print, came up suddenly in her mind, and she impounded the rumpled and disordered sheets Marie was carrying out. A cursory glance at them as she sipped her coffee made her quest look easy. There were millions of flats for rent, apparently, and they were arranged according to neighborhood—West Side flats together by themselves, two or three columns of them.

She tore this part out of the sheet, and after satisfying herself that it listed plenty of places at twenty dollars, and less, she crumpled it into her wrist-bag and went on with her breakfast, that is to say, with her coffee. These had, for many years, been synonymous terms to Celia. How Alfred could eat things like liver and sausage, or even eggs, at this time of the day, she had never been able to understand.

Her idea was, when, in the train, she got out her list and looked at it, that she would select a place at the price she wanted, go out to it, and rent it. She wasn't looking for luxury. She hoped—or thought

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she hoped, sitting there comfortably enough in the train, that it would prove as uncomfortable, and cramped and mean as possible. The meaner it was, and the more destitute of comforts the life they had to live in it, the more triumphantly could she demonstrate to Alfred that he had misjudged her—the more completely avenge his insulting belief that now he was poor, she would abandon him and begin a bright lookout for somebody else.

So she picked out, more or less at random, something she thought would do, and dismissed the matter from her mind. It didn't occur to her, until after she got off the train in the terminal, that she hadn't the least idea where the address was, or how to get to it. Then, under the spur of necessity, she went to the information desk and asked the man.

He wasn't looking at her, and his answer was a gesture toward a tattered—a vilely dirty—volume on the shelf at her elbow, which she made out to be a City Directory.

It is fair to say that Celia's first step into her new world began at that moment. She had never,

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in her life, been compelled to submit to contact with anything as repulsively filthy as that volume.

She opened it and stared at it helplessly.

"But," she said, "I don't want to know what street and number any one lives in. I want to know where a certain address is."

"Street Index," he said. Then, with a look at her, relented. "Here! I'll find it for you."

But the search was a rather complicated one and he was interrupted three or four times before he got to the end of it, by impatient train-catchers, and the directions he finally gave her were not very enlightening—involved questioning conductors as to where to take transfers and asking a policeman, when she finally got in the general neighborhood, which way to walk.

The morning was half gone when she finally found the place. She'd walked what seemed miles; her feet ached excruciatingly, she felt worse than dirty—contaminated by the last street-car she'd ridden in, and she couldn't be sure she'd got a cinder out of her eye.

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But the place she found had at least the merit of making her forget these minor troubles.

The terrifying thing about it was that it was not so bad. She was escorted through it by the tenant of the flat below, who had charge of the key, and this lady praised it with genuine enthusiasm. She pointed out that the floors weren't badly worn at all, and had recently been coated with shellac; she indicated the soundness of the plaster. Nothing would come falling down on your head here, even if the tenants of the topmost flat of all should rouse round a bit. There was a radiator in each of the four rooms, and the heat was ample. They, down below, frequently had to open a window somewhere for a while. It actually got too hot. The front room had two windows looking on the street, the kitchen, at the back, got the benefit not only of its own back yard, but of the vacant lot behind it on the next street, while the two middle rooms, thanks to the fact that the adjoining building ran up only two stories, were at the top of the light-well, and were almost as good

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as outside rooms. She was sure it was a bargain at the money, and Celia, with a sinking heart, was forced to conclude that it was.

Because it came over her, in a wave, that she couldn't stand it. There was a soul-blighting ugliness in everything about it—the shape of each of the four cramped, mean little rooms, the mean little doors by which they opened out, one after another, on a mean little four-foot corridor that strung them together, the artificial oak graining of the wood-work, the fanciful hideousness of the gas-fixtures in the front room, and the water-mottled oak mantel. Celia's cicerone admitted freely that the fireplace this mantel enclosed was not practicable, but pointed out that fires were a nuisance anyway, and that in this flat, with an abundance of the hottest kind of steam-heat, they were, happily, unnecessary. In the dead of winter, a little cotton tucked into the two west windows made everything as snug and tight as one could desire.

Celia escaped from it in a good deal of panic, like a fly out of a web, with the allegation of the

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fictitious necessity of bringing her husband for a look at it before she decided anything. Her new friend understood the necessity, but regretted it. A bargain like this was likely to be snapped up at any minute. What Celia said to herself, when she stood panting on the sidewalk, was that she could stand a slum, but she couldn't stand that.

The fact was, of course, that a slum was simply a literary expression to her, an idea made up of descriptions from two or three "realistic" novels, and the stage-sets of three or four lugubrious plays. But this flat she had been looking at was not realistic. It was real. And it brought down upon her an ominous sickening realization of what married life on a salary of twenty-two dollars and fifty cents a week might mean; not as the subject of an acrimonious scene between her and Alfred in the interval between an excellent dinner and their retirement to two comfortable beds, but as a thing to be endured for months — years — forever, perhaps.

She began walking slowly in the direction of the

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nearest car line, and as she walked the idea insinuated itself into her mind that, if she couldn't stand it, she needn't. There was that comfortable home she had lived in for years before her marriage, where, with any excuse at all, or indeed with none, they'd be glad to welcome her. There was her room; there was her place at the table. And wouldn't it be better to go back to it? Wouldn't she be an unnecessary drag on Fred if she insisted on taking him out to a place like that flat? Twenty-two dollars and a half a week, to a man with no domestic responsibilities, would be comfortable enough. He'd suggested that himself.

She got as far as that, but no further, for a wave of good honest wrath came surging over her again. That's what he'd expected her to think! That was the incredibly, cowardly, mercenary wretch he'd believed her! And he'd been nearer right than she knew. Well, he should never know it.

The tears came smarting into her eyes so that she had to stop, there in the middle of the sidewalk,

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with two or three curious idlers staring at her, and get out her handkerchief and mop before she could see to go on. She'd show him! She'd find a place somewhere—to-day!

At four o'clock, more tired than she had ever been before in her life, thoroughly discouraged, but still determined not to go home until she'd found a place where she and Alfred could go on living together, giddy with hunger, though she realized very imperfectly how much hunger had to do with her exhaustion, she turned into a little lunch room.

She wanted food for its own sake. But more than that, she wanted it as an excuse for sitting down. She must have a little rest before she could walk another step. She was down to bedrock for the first time in her life.

If the uncounted apartments she'd looked at since that first one hadn't by themselves affected her so strongly as that first one had, they had at least rubbed that feeling in. She'd wasted a good deal of energy climbing flights of stairs to places that had

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cost more than her maximum, going up a bit at a time, without realizing what she was doing, until she caught herself on the edge of taking a place that cost thirty-five dollars a month. When she dropped back from this, the twenty-dollar places looked worse than ever. All her fine sensibilities had been scraped and rasped by the sound of voices she had been hearing—the intonations of speech—the way people wore their clothes. She was more than blue. She was black and blue.

That was the color of the world when she sat down in the little lunch room. She'd have thought that it was impossible that she could ever smile again. But she did within half a minute.

Her opening of the street door had rung a little bell, and she had heard through the plain white board partition that cut the place transversely half-way back, a groan and a sort of grunting yawn. A door in this partition had opened almost immediately and she'd caught a glimpse of a man without a coat or collar, in the act of finishing the

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stretch the yawn had been preliminary to. But the door had closed again instantly, leaving the man on the other side.

But within half a minute, as I said, he appeared again, this time most decorously clad in a white jacket with a military collar. He had, too, rather a military air of standing at attention—of, indeed, always having stood at attention, absurdly at variance with his appearance of the moment before. But there was a bright engaging twinkle in his eye that candidly confessed the absurdity.

Involuntarily Celia smiled at him. He'd evidently had red hair once, but it was now a dusty gray, and his clean-shaven sanguine face was finely netted all over with wrinkles. And if he wasn't Irish, then there isn't an Irishman in County Clare. When he asked, "What can I do for you, Miss?" she said, rather to her own surprise, "I'm afraid I interrupted your nap."

"Well, an' that's true, too," he admitted. "I've no key for that door, and I keep the place open

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day and night. And, as we haven't many demands for afternoon tea in these parts, I generally indulge myself as you have discovered."

Just the sound of his mellow, pleasantly modulated voice, with the slight enrichment of its consonants that suggested a brogue without actually constituting it, was indescribably friendly and soothing to her worn nerves.

"I hadn't thought of tea," she said. It would be impossible to address him in any other tone than the one she would use for a social equal. "You see, I forgot all about lunch. I suppose it's too late for that, though."

He professed himself ready to prepare her as elaborate a meal as she wanted, but pointed out that the elaboration would take time. If instant relief was called for, he'd suggest a pot of tea and a fried-egg sandwich.

This was a viand that, as it happened, she had never heard of, and the notion of it visibly amused her. But she was a little dubious about the tea. Not that she didn't like tea, but—

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"You needn't fear my brew," he assured her. "Tea's a tippie I thoroughly understand."

Five minutes later, with a contented sigh more eloquent than words, she acknowledged the justice of this boast. She had kind words, too, for the sandwich.

He deprecated her praise while visibly basking in it, but admitted that there was a considerable degree of art involved in the proper frying of an egg.

Her eyes widened a little as she said, half under her breath, "I wonder if I could fry one at all."

"Well, there's great folly," he said, "in knowing too many things. Take myself, for example. I'm a bit of a cook, carpenter, ladies' maid, farrier, plumber and gas-fitter and infant's nurse, to mention a few accomplishments that come to mind—and here I am!"

"How in the world—?" she gasped.

"Fourteen years in the army, ma'am. That's the explanation. Too good an officer's striker ever to be anything else."

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She didn't know quite what to say to this, since in spite of the humorous melancholy of his voice, condolence seemed not to be asked for. So she munched her fried-egg sandwich in silence for a minute or two, and finally remarked:

"You didn't say you're a real-estate agent, though, and that's what I need. I'm looking for a place out here—a flat, I suppose, where two people with hardly any money at all can live."

"Well," he said, "there are plenty of places out here where people with hardly any money at all do live, and more perhaps where they could. But I'd be better able to help you if I knew just how much money you meant by 'hardly any at all.'"

"I mean twenty-two dollars and fifty cents a week," she said with such unexpected promptness and precision, and with a tinge of defiance thrown in, that she made him smile.

"Well, there's nothing easier than that," he told her. "I know of a fine little place just around the corner that you can get for twelve dollars a month. They could live there as snugly as you please.

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Three rooms and bath, and one of them a fine large one."

"Twelve dollars a month!" she echoed. "And I've been looking at places all day about twenty, and they were horrible!"

He shot a keen look at her. "Well, I wouldn't say," he admitted, "that it's a place you'd be carin' to live in yourself. And it's possible, too, since it's been on my hands three months—ever since my brother-in-law's second wife married again and moved away to Kansas City, that I exaggerate the good points of it. But you might find it worth a look, and if you don't mind waiting till my daughter comes back from school, which will be any minute now, to look after this place, I'll take you up there and show you around."

In the five minutes or so that intervened late that night between the time when Celia got into bed and the time when she fell asleep the conviction established itself in her mind that, if Mr. Lawrence Doyle had not actually hypnotized her, it had at least been the glamour of his personal charms and

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not the desirability of the twelve-dollar apartment he had shown her round, that had led her to take it not only promptly but with enthusiasm.

It did indeed comprise, as he had said, three rooms and a bath (though the "bath" required a qualifying foot-note), and it was also true that the largest of the three rooms was, in actual feet and inches, commodious and pleasantly proportioned. Even for the combined functions of eating and "living" it would be ample.

What shook Celia's confidence in her judgment was the recollection of her enthusiasm over the absence of the steam heat and the presence instead of a "base-burner" which Doyle would be glad of a chance to sell her for six dollars and seventy-five cents. There was nothing like a good old-fashioned coal fire for comfort. This steam heat, now; always too much or not enough, and nothing to do about it but pound the radiator with a poker. A good coal-stove you ran to suit yourself—or rather, it ran itself to suit you. Also she was able to recall a sensation of genuine delight

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over a gas-pipe in the kitchen, which would not only reduce culinary labors to next to nothing, by making it possible to cook with gas, but, for a trifling additional investment in a small boiler and heater, one could have hot water whenever one wanted it, day or night. Celia, who had all her life taken hot water for granted, exactly as she had taken air to breathe, was quite thrilled over this.

She had taken an inexplicable pleasure, too, in the fact that their bedroom—it was really nothing but an alcove off the big room, capable of being shut off by curtains, and just about big enough to contain a double bed—was up two steepish steps from the main floor-level—a concession to the necessity for getting the stairs up from the entry below. Most unreasonable of all was her delight in the obvious fact that the bathroom had clearly not been designed by the architect to serve that purpose. It had three doors, to begin with, all glazed; one into the big room, one into the kitchen and one which let you out on the back porch—quite an extensive back porch, formed by flooring over and

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railing in a one-story extension at the back of the building. The door into the kitchen had been rendered impracticable by the installation of the tub—a large, circular, galvanized iron tub—which Mr. Doyle pointed to with pride as a demonstration of his prowess as a plumber, for he had done this job himself and knew it was good. The pipes came simply and naïvely through a hole in the kitchen wall.

Celia had been aware, even when striking her bargain with Mr. Doyle, that these unique advantages were not, perhaps, the sort that would appeal instantly to every mind, and that the place required to be seen with an eye. Given time to reflect, she might have come to the conclusion that she liked it all just for the same unreasonable reason that had made her hate the dozens of modern, mean, machine-made places she had been looking at all day. This place would make poverty picturesque.

She hadn't any leisure for reflection, though, because of a remark Mr. Doyle made just after the bargain had been struck. He said that if she'd

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let him hire a man to go to cleaning first thing in the morning, her friends could move their furniture in the next afternoon. And the word furniture had brought her up with a jerk. Her mind had been running on a single track and it hadn't got to the furniture yet.

She told Mr. Doyle to go ahead and get the cleaner, left him on a promise to turn up some time the next day, and settled down in a street-car, homeward bound, to wrestle with this new problem.

She couldn't use any of their own furniture. The Colliers would want every stick of it. Everything must be bought new. She had, at first, only a vague idea of how much this operation would cost. But presently, out of nowhere, an advertisement that had once adorned the bill-boards came up into her memory.

"We will feather your nest," it had read, "for one hundred dollars." She was grateful for the figure, though she meant to do her own feathering. But where was she going to get the hundred dollars?

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Well, there was the first month's rent on their own house—two hundred dollars payable in advance. The sensible easy thing to do would be to go ahead and get what she wanted, at once, of one of the big department stores where they had a charge account, and let the Colliers' check cover it. But this didn't satisfy her. That two hundred a month rent was sacred to the payment of old bills. For other purposes it should be treated as if it didn't exist. If ever she began dipping into that, where would her vengeance on Alfred be—her triumphant demonstration that he'd misjudged her?

The next possibility she thought of was of buying it on the instalment plan. She could ask Fred to appropriate so much a week out of his salary to pay it off. But this would involve taking her husband in on it, and she didn't like the idea. She wanted something to hurl at him complete. If she were to go to him with the problem he'd be entitled to a say as to what she bought. It would give him another opportunity to act generously and feel aggrieved, which, she told herself passionately, she

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never meant to give him again. No, somehow she must find that hundred dollars herself.

Well, then she thought of her jewelry. It would be no trick at all to sell one of her good rings for a hundred dollars.

But she rejected this idea with violence. She'd done the only thing self-respect would allow her to do, after that maddening insult of his, in giving all that jewelry back to him. The fact that he had refused to accept it didn't alter the essentials of the case. The stuff was his, every scrap of it. The box, still in its paper wrapping, must be kept intact; slipped unobtrusively in among his belongings, perhaps, after they had got settled in the flat—at all events, demonstrably untouched.

But where was she going to get her hundred dollars? She thought for a while that she'd exhausted all the possibilities, and her mind slipped off on a new tack.

Specifically, just what articles of furniture would the flat need? Her mind's eye dwelt once more upon its three rooms and bath, and it occurred to

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her then that there wasn't a closet in the place. What in the world would she do with all her clothes?

At that she drew in a little gasp of excitement and let out a sigh of relief. She knew now where she could get her hundred dollars. It was a perfect solution. Fred wouldn't have a leg to stand on.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW WORLD

CELIA began operations Friday morning—early Friday morning, be it said, before Alfred had finished breakfast—and he had to take the seven-eighths these days, in order to get down to his job on time—with a very careful and deliberate toilet. It was the first time she had paid any attention to her looks since she had donned her armor for Ruth Collier's visit on Wednesday.

At a quarter to eight, just after Marie had brought up her coffee and toast, the door-bell rang.

"Oh, that's—!" Celia began, then checked herself. "Go down and see who it is," she directed.

She took a last swift reassuring look into her mirror as the maid descended the stairs, then rather carefully arranged herself in the big chair behind the slim little table where Marie had deposited her tray. She broke off a bit of toast, but didn't eat

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it; sat listening to what was happening at the now open door. A man with a brusk colloquial idiom, and a strongly Oriental accent, was trying to convince Marie that he had important business with her mistress. Marie, it seemed, was not trying to conceal her misgivings about him, which were of the darkest sort. But eventually she let him in and came up to Celia with a card.

Celia dropped a negligent glance upon the not immaculate face of it, and said, "Oh, yes. He wants to buy some clothes of mine. Bring him up. And, Marie," she added as the girl turned away, "don't leave the room till he does." Then, with a fine exterior calm, she took the first sip of her coffee.

It is not to be denied that she was a little frightened. And yet there was something pleasurable about her excitement, too. A new combination of emotions for Celia French. She had never been an adventurer.

But then, everything about her present situation was new. It was a new thing to need—absolutely to *need*—a hundred dollars. It was a new thing

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to be thrown, definitely and unescapably, upon her own resources for getting it. Consequently the thrilling excitement attendant upon her discovery of a way to get it was also new.

After her first gasp of relief when it occurred to her that she could get that hundred dollars by selling her clothes, she had, for a few minutes, felt pretty sick. She'd seen herself lugging a great bundle from one second-hand store to another, battered—discouraged. She had wept a few tears, there in the street-car, of pure self-pity, and then had dried them with a sudden flame of self-contempt. Why shouldn't she play the game as well as she could, instead of as badly? If any bullying was to be done, why not do it herself?

The entertainment of that idea began an epoch with Celia—really changed the texture of life for her. She had sat down at the telephone as soon as she reached the house, called up, out of the classified directory, a dealer who advertised a most liberal disposition toward the purchase of used gowns, and told him curtly that if he cared to come to her

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house before eight o'clock to-morrow morning, she would do business with him. She was very busy and would be engaged later.

There had been an enormous satisfaction in feeling that she had got just the right intimidating ring into her voice. There had even been a satisfaction in recognizing that the man at the other telephone was playing the same game—didn't know whether he could come or not; doubted whether the things she had to show him would be worth the trouble. The ring at the bell at a quarter to eight this morning meant that she'd won this first skirmish. She'd played the game better than he had.

Now, as she waited, she was keen to follow up this victory. A feeling she did not even note the absence of was shame—humiliation. She didn't a bit mind letting Marie know the nature of the transaction, and was quite indifferent as to what the maid might think, or whom she might confide her speculations about it to. It was the sort of secret she'd have guarded with her life a week ago.

You see money—the need of money—had always

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been the skeleton in the Frenches' closet. The assumption current in that family from the time of Celia's earliest memories had been that all people—all people of the sort one met—were providentially provided with ample incomes. Any fact which threatened to give the lie to this presumption was *ipso facto* scandalous — unmentionable — indecent. And while, of course, there were other topics similarly tabooed, this was the only one of them that did not easily acquiesce in being ignored.

The Frenches were always managing, doing without, stretching the not very elastic band of their income to make the ends of it meet around their necessities, and they had developed, not only for use before the world, but even in the intimacies of their domestic circle, a whole vocabulary of euphemistic paraphrase and circumlocution. You can make any subject indecent by avoiding it like that.

A year of married life with Alfred Blair had reduced Celia's sensitiveness to the topic, but had not changed her ideas about it. It had still seemed

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to her, up to the night of that disastrous dinner, a little indelicate to ask the price of anything she meant to buy. Or, if not that, at least to let it appear that price was the determining factor whether she bought it or not. It still seemed intolerable to her to try to drive a bargain—get anything cheaper than the price it was offered at. The mere thought of trying to sell anything of her own made her shiver. It always made her blue when women book agents came to the house and began reeling off the merits of some set of volumes, *Mountain Peaks of Literature*, and so on, that they wanted her to subscribe to.— She used to wonder, in a kind of nightmare, what she'd do if she were ever thrust into a situation where that was the only means open to her for keeping herself alive. And she decided, quite seriously, that if it ever came to that she'd kill herself with morphine or chloral instead.

But a gyroscope, if its gyrations are rapid enough, will do unexpected and surprising things.

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It is capable even of driving a hard bargain with the law of gravity. If you will assume a living, highly conscious, self-critical gyroscope, which had never really revolved at all, had always leaned up in a corner for support, not fancying the notion of tumbling over and scratching itself, and then will imagine this gyroscope, through no volition of its own, suddenly set whirling at ten thousand revolutions a minute, you will get a pretty good notion of the new Celia.

She'd have said, if questioned, that the force which had speeded her up and transformed her into so new and astonishing a person was her furious anger with her husband—a purely retaliatory desire to demonstrate to him how injurious and unfounded his opinion of her had been.

But she hadn't time to concern herself much with whys and wherefores. It wasn't with any conscious reference to Alfred at all that she braced herself for the arrival of the second-hand clothes man and prepared to get as much of his money as she could for what she had to sell him.

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She sipped her coffee daintily, and told Marie what things to bring out from the closet.

Her first glance at her opponent gave her the mistaken idea that it was going to be easy. He wasn't much to look at; in most respects, a distinctly inferior specimen. His manner, in the shock of their first encounter, was weak and servile. Even his oily black hair had a meek look, and the unhealthy pallor of his face accentuated it.

But when Marie had brought out, one after another, all the pretty frocks the closet contained—evening gowns, house dresses, a smart little afternoon suit, and her two opera cloaks—and he, after an appraising glance at each, and the notation of a figure on a greasy bit of paper with the well-licked stub of a pencil, offered her, with a quite coolly indifferent air of utter finality, thirty-two dollars and seventy-five cents for the lot, the blow almost finished her. She felt a lump coming in her throat. For a sickening moment she actually believed that that was all the things were worth. Even after her reason had come to the rescue she

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went on believing, for another minute, that that was all he thought they were worth and the utmost that he would ever pay.

But anger—one of the best and most necessary of all our passions, never forget that—came to the rescue. That servile, oily little rat standing there, pawing over her pretty clothes, had *meant* her to feel sick like that. He had shot her a look out of his bright beady little eyes and no doubt noted the effect of the blow, and was gloating now, inside, over the prospect of getting those lovely clothes for so near nothing.

Her finely penciled eyebrows flattened, and her blue eyes darkened beneath them.

“Show him the way out, Marie,” she commanded crisply. “I have too much to do this morning to waste time listening to vulgar jokes.”

The man began protesting volubly, but Celia cut him short.

“You don’t speak English very well,” she observed. “Perhaps you didn’t say what you meant. If you meant a hundred and thirty-two dollars and

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seventy-five cents, you may stay"—she glanced over at her boudoir-clock—"fifteen minutes and we'll talk about it. I can't give you any more time than that."

His eyes rolled in his head. He appealed to the high gods. The lady was beside herself—lunatic. These were not the expressions he used.

"I'm not crazy at all," said Celia warmly. "I'm extremely annoyed at having to listen, when I'm busy, to childish nonsense. I know what those clothes are worth, and so do you, and unless you're willing to pay at least half that much I simply won't bother with you."

He came up, with a wrench, to fifty; with a groan, to seventy-five—to eighty. He looked the clothes all over again, minutely, and delivered an impressive ultimatum—eighty-two dollars and twenty cents.

Celia got up and went over to her dressing-table; sat down in front of it with her back to him, took an unimportant little gold pin out of her negligée, and, holding it between her lips, as though she had

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already begun the operation of dressing for the street, said:

“Take him away, Marie.”

It was an admirable bit of stage-management, and it worked.

“All right,” the man said. “I’ll give you a hundred for the lot.”

Celia took her pin out of her mouth.

Now you are to note this. A hundred dollars was what she had to have. She had won—barely won—her victory. She didn’t *need* any more. But the thrill of the game had got into her blood. For the game’s own sake, and for nothing else in the world, she said:

“You can have them for a hundred and twenty-five.”

She got, eventually, one hundred and eighteen dollars. And the satisfaction she took in the superfluous eighteen, counted painfully out, in frightfully shabby one- and two-dollar bills, was, it is the unexaggerated truth, one of the very keenest pleasures she had ever enjoyed.

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Well, by then it was half past eight, and it was Friday morning. By six o'clock Saturday night, if Alfred were to be crushed in a convincing and finished manner, she must have his new home ready for him, furnished—settled—dinner cooking on the stove. She had the flat. She had the hundred and eighteen dollars, and she had the better part of two days.

In the buoyant mood of her departure from the house, fifteen minutes or so after that of the chastened clothing dealer, the allowance, in respect both of time and money, seemed ample.

The place wouldn't need much furniture—a table and three or four chairs, a bed, kitchen things. It occurred to her, as she rode in on the train, that it wouldn't do to allow her possession of a large sum like a hundred and eighteen dollars to lead her to luxurious extremes in her purchases. The place must look Spartan, or half the moral effect would be lost. If she could tuck away thirty or forty dollars in—she smiled over this—a stocking or a teapot, it would be all the better.

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She wouldn't waste time over it, either. She'd go to one of the big department stores on the cheap side of State Street, march through her purchases without any shilly-shally about making up her mind, then go out to the flat and assist the cleaner whom Larry Doyle had, presumably, put to work. This would leave Saturday free for putting things in place and getting settled.

This program determined upon, she settled herself in the train to the contemplation of her living-room as she wanted it to look.

The first thing she saw was a big rag rug. They looked homely, and were really rather smart. A bright blue would go well with the smoky gray of the walls, she thought. It would be better, perhaps, not to go to the wrong side of State Street for that. They kept them, she knew, in all the big stores on her own side of that thoroughfare. And then two comfortable, but unpretentious, chairs—a big one for Fred and a smaller one for herself, one on each side of the stove. And a plain old-fashioned table, with leaves that folded down.

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She must, at this point, have slipped off into a day-dream, since, with her waking mind, she knew better than to suppose she could accomplish an old-fashioned high-boy and a New England pre-Revolutionary side-table with her hundred and eighteen dollars.

They went agreeably into the picture, though, and she went on adding to it with growing pleasure, until she saw herself, not in her own small chair, but on the arm of Alfred's big one, her own arm tucked cozily round his neck, his nice, still thick, just a little bit wavy and altogether adorable hair where she could comfortably put her cheek down on it.

At this point, properly scandalized with herself for such even imagined inconstancy to her fixed determination, she shook herself awake again, and reverted to more practical considerations. She'd have the blue rug, though.

She went straight to Shield's and bought it for twenty-four dollars. Really for six, you see, because she still had ninety-four left out of her hun-

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dred. Then, with the reflection that things here, after all, cost no more than the same things would across the street, and that she would save time, precious time, too, by not adventuring in unfamiliar ways, she went up to the household utilities department, intent on furnishing her kitchen.

She felt very virtuously practical over beginning with the kitchen, instead of leaving it to the last.

"I want," she said to the young man who came up, courteously concerned to know wherein he could serve her, "I want to get everything one needs for a kitchen—a little kitchen, for only two people."

She caught her breath there, and turned away with a blush and a blink. The thing sounded so absurdly sentimental and honeymoonish—so ironically at variance with the grim reality—the total smash—the totally hopeless smash that had overtaken her and Alfred. As she went on, her voice had the cold ring of disillusioned practicality.

"I want to get it all as cheaply as possible," she said.

This injunction didn't discourage the young man

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at all. What spoke louder than words to him was the cut of her skirt, the look of her hat, the condition of her gloves. Indeed, the very quality of the voice that pronounced the words.

He remarked easily that cheapness was a desideratum, of course, but that cheap things were not really cheap. This was to say, that you got more service for your money, which was the real test, of course, by not being too sparing about your initial outlay.

“We’ll begin with refrigerators,” he said. “That’s one of the most important things, really.”

Celia started slightly. She’d forgotten about a refrigerator. Their house had had one built in. But of course they’d have to have one.

She spent an agreeable quarter of an hour among the refrigerators, and at last tentatively agreed upon one. Then they moved over to the kitchen cabinets.

At this point a cloud, the size of a man’s hand, appeared on Celia’s horizon.

The young man—he was a very tactful young

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man—apparently became aware of it. Gently, but irresistibly, he convinced her that such a cabinet was indispensable. The saving it effected in such staples as sugar, flour, coffee, and so on, by keeping them in properly devised air-tight containers, was enormous—incalculable. Here was a charming little affair, not unnecessarily elaborate, done in a modest gray enamel. Not so showy as white, but more practical. Being constructed entirely of steel, it was impervious to vermin and easily kept in perfectly sanitary condition. He couldn't conscientiously recommend anything inferior.

It, tentatively too, went down on the list.

But the cloud was getting bigger. The young man, aware of this perhaps, relaxed his severity in the matter of fireless cookers. There was really no need of going to great expense here. This one at sixteen dollars was as good as one really needed. An exceptional value this week—a special. Had been twenty, and would be again.

When it came to utensils, though, the young man was adamant. There was really only one ma-

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terial for pots, pans, skillets, kettles and so on. This was cast aluminum. Not the cheap stamped stuff. The solid article. The finest, the most expensive enamel in the world would crack and flake, if it were allowed to burn—and such accidents would happen in spite of the housewife's most rigorous attention.

He led her up, unresisting—dazed a little, if he'd known the truth—to the sumptuous silvery array: coffee-pots, tea-kettles, stew-pans of assorted sizes, frying-pans, griddles.

“Now, I'd suggest—” he said capably, and began making a list.

“Speaking of fireless cookers,” said Celia presently, in the midst of this—and the troubled quality of her voice distracted him from the labor he was proceeding with, obviously *con amore*—“speaking of fireless cookers, how much does a stove cost—a gas stove?”

“We don't carry them,” he said, “though we could get you one, of course. But you could get a pretty good one, I should say, for thirty-five or forty dollars.”

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"And how much," she asked, "are the things you have already put down on that list? Not these cooking dishes—the others?"

The refrigerator, the fireless cooker and the kitchen cabinet, it seemed, came to eighty-four dollars and twenty-five cents.

Celia turned away from him, bit her lip hard, and clenched her hands until the fingers in her neat gloves felt numb. For a matter of twenty seconds she experienced violently the sensation one has when an elevator starts going down too fast.

Here's where the difference came in. The old Celia would have managed a tolerably indifferent nod and a phrase about coming back a little later, or looking a little farther, together with, perhaps, a glance at her watch to account for the suddenness of her departure. And she'd have gone away—sick—humiliated.

The new Celia, after just that twenty seconds for getting control of the elevator, turned back to the young man, and with a candidly rueful smile met his eye.

"I'm awfully sorry to have wasted your time,"

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she said, "but the sort of things we've been looking at are simply out of the question. You see, I've only got a hundred dollars—ninety-four dollars, that is, to furnish the whole flat. It's just a little three-room place out on the West Side. I suppose it can be done somehow. It's going to be. But not with things I could buy here!"

Are you waiting to be told that on hearing this avowal the young man looked superior and annoyed and said something disagreeable about our house of course not handling that class of goods? If so, you will wait in vain. But I doubt if you even expected that. Certainly not if you have any adequate conception of how Celia looked and how her voice sounded when she said it; with heightened color and bright eyes, wide with a look of adventure in them like a child's; or of the hint of breathlessness about her speech, revealing how much she had surprised herself by giving away this confidence.

What the young man did was to blush to the hair, smile rather idiotically, he decided afterward, and experience a momentary twinge of the liveliest

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envy of the unknown man who was going to share the little three-room apartment and its ninety-four-dollar furnishings with her.

"I'll tell you something," he said very unofficially—confidentially almost. In fact, he had ceased altogether to be the perfect salesman, and had become instead a man and a brother. "I never can get my mother to buy any of her kitchen things up here. She gets them all—pots and pans and such, you know, at the five- and ten-cent store. She says the things wear out, of course, but that when they do you can always afford to buy new ones because you paid so little in the first place."

"Why, that's wonderful," said Celia. "I never thought of that. I'm very, very much obliged."

She felt like shaking hands with him, and so, indeed, did he with her. But good manners restrained them both.

When she turned away, though, he fell in beside her and strolled along in the direction of the elevators. It seemed he had something more to say.

"About stoves now—"

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Celia stopped short and faced him again. You certainly couldn't get a stove at the ten-cent store.

"Of course, if you're going to serve elaborate meals, or do a lot of baking, you need a big stove with a couple of ovens and a plate warmer and all the rest. But if you aren't, why don't you just get a flat stove without any oven—the kind that stands on a table—or a box? You could buy that kind for three or four dollars."

Celia drew in a long breath. "You simply haven't any idea how kind you've been," she said. "You've just—saved the situation."

And, after he'd stammered, "Not at all," and said how glad he was, she went on:

"And if I save all that, I suppose I could buy a really good refrigerator. Here, you know."

The young man blushed again. What he'd done already was bad enough, from the point of view of the head of the department. But what was coming next was rank treason, nothing less. No wonder he hung fire for a second. But it got blurted out at last.

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"I tell you what I'd do," he said. "You know these big storage warehouses? There are some out on the West Side. Well, they're always selling things that have been stored and not paid for, you know—all kinds of household things. You could probably get a really good refrigerator—as good as you'd want, for eight or nine dollars."

This time Celia did shake hands, and blurted out a secret at the same time.

"If ever I get rich again," she said, "I'll come up here and buy everything in sight."

She left an excellent salesman completely demoralized for the day.

As for Celia, she went her way to her flat to see how the cleaning was coming on, and then to Larry Doyle's lunch room to find out from him where the best storage warehouse for buying second-hand furniture was, buoyant with—well, no, it wouldn't be fair to her numerous and conscientious moral preceptors to call it a new discovery. They must have told her all about nettle grasping. Very likely some one of them had told her about gyroscopes,

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too—perhaps even had demonstrated that if one were rotating vigorously enough upon its proper axis, it would decline to topple over at the first push. They had expatiated, too, I am sure, on the importance of having an aim in life, and pursuing it energetically, and promised her ample rewards in the consciousness of duty well done.

But Celia, hot on the trail of a seven-dollar refrigerator and a three-dollar stove, was indulging in none of these smug generalities. All she was aware of was that life had suddenly become a very eager, thrilling, glowing sort of business, and that she was running it herself, making it happen differently from the way it had set out to happen. She had made it happen differently to other people. She even made it happen differently to herself.

That man who bought her clothes this morning—he hadn't meant to pay her a hundred and eighteen dollars for them. He hadn't meant to pay half of that. But she, Celia, all by herself, had made him do it. And then, up there at Shield's, with that thoroughly correct and highly superior young

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salesman. She'd gone on with him for three-quarters of an hour, feeling wretched and ashamed, and a little hopeless, because she knew, without acknowledging it to herself, that she couldn't afford to buy the things he was showing to her. But when, at last, for a penance really, because she was ashamed of herself for being ashamed, she'd made herself, who hadn't meant to in the least, tell him the actual literal truth in dollars and cents, she had found herself perfectly at ease at once.

What hurt, she reflected, wasn't having people know things about you. It was having them suspect things that you were trying to hide. Well, that was easy. She need never be ashamed of anything again.

With a little leisure for reflection she might have made some further discoveries just as surprising, or even more so. But you won't need to be told that she had none. She had two tasks on her hands: one to get the new flat ready for herself and Fred, the other to get their house ready for the Colliers. Either one of them was enough to fill to bursting

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the time at her disposal, and that she actually accomplished both may be taken as a triumphant demonstration that a body can occupy two different spaces at the same time.

Part of the credit for this must go to Larry Doyle, for it was he who organized Celia's activities, showed her the importance of doing certain things first. It was nearly eleven o'clock Friday morning when she confronted him across his luncheon bar, and she plunged into the midst of things without the waste of a minute.

"It isn't any friends of mine that I took the place for," she began. "It's my husband and me. He's lost all his money, and he's got a job at twenty-two dollars and a half a week. I told him he could leave the flat to me and that I'd have it ready to live in to-morrow when he comes home from work. I'll bring sheets and blankets and towels and table linen from home. Those things don't go with a furnished house, do they? And I've got a silly blue rug that I paid twenty-four dollars for for the big room, and I've got ninety-four dollars to buy

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everything else with. Oh, six of it goes for your stove. That leaves eighty-eight. So I want you to tell me where there's a storage warehouse, or a second-hand shop, where I can get everything cheap."

It's no wonder she rather took Larry Doyle's breath, with her bright cheeks—the March wind was sharp this morning—and her eager voice, and her half-scared adventurous way of making friends with him.

While he was making up his mind what to say first, she ran on:

"It will be possible, won't it—to have everything ready for him, running, you know, by six o'clock to-morrow night? Oh, but it's got to be!"

"Sure, it's possible," he said. "But you don't want to be bothering with your second-hand furniture yet a while. Go straight to the gas office now—it's not far—and get your stove and tell them you must have it connected up with a meter to-day. To-morrow's a half-day, being Saturday, and you won't get a hand's turn of work out of those boys. So, if you don't want to be left till Monday—"

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"I see," she broke in, champing to be off. "Tell me where it is."

He did, and added the warning that they'd very likely tell her, to begin with, that it was impossible for them to put the job through this week.

"But I'm thinking," he added, "that you'll know what to say to them better than I could tell you."

She nodded and smiled, partly in anticipation, partly in amused remembrance of a Celia who had ceased to exist some time during the past week, who had always said, with a touch of unconscious pride, that she couldn't beg for things.

"On your way back from there," Larry called after her, "stop in at the coal office and have them send up a hundred-pound sack of range for your stove. It won't do for you to be sitting around in those cold rooms."

She might have tossed that caution off with airy impatience but for a phrase the Irishman sent after her.

"There are them that can afford to be sick," he said, "and there are them that can't."

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She was inclined to disrelish that idea as she walked away with it—the notion that her health was an asset her husband was entitled to count upon. But she adopted it instantly, and presently found a certain satisfaction in that point of view, partly, perhaps, because she felt that Alfred's chivalrousness would be shocked by it.

She found them, at the gas office, quite as difficult as she had been warned they would be, and it took a half-hour's intensive bombardment with all her feminine artillery to reduce the man she finally got herself taken to to a weakly acquiescent state, in which the promise she wanted could be wrung out of him. Then she paid for her stove—a three-burner affair—and departed in triumph.

Her activities from then on were too complex and multifarious to be followed in detail. She stalked elusive bargains from one likely lair to another, slowly, it seemed to her, but really with remarkable expedition, accumulating the articles she needed.

She had her ups and downs. There were ex-

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ultant moments, just after finding something that was exactly what she wanted, and buying it for less than she had believed possible, when she thought she was going to have more money than she needed and revived the notion of a nest-egg hoard in a stocking. There were moments of despair when some necessity she had completely overlooked reared its head and stared at her.

She wound up at the nearest ten-cent store at half past four in the afternoon; purchased—very much at haphazard, because she was too tired to think—a quantity of kitchen dishes, and lugged them, in two vast irregular bundles, from which the strings were constantly threatening to slip, back to the flat.

She experienced a very keen pleasure in finding Larry Doyle there making a fire in the big base-burner. Not only because a fire was very much needed, the place being cold as a stone and damp into the bargain from the cleaning it had got, but because Larry was, by this time, such a very old

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and dear friend, and it warmed and rested one's heart to see him.

He reported that the gas stove had come and that the man with the meter had already come in and connected it up; probably a world's record for promptness, he thought, and an extraordinary tribute to Celia's powers of persuasion. Also, a large rolled-up package had come from Shield's that must be the rug she had spoken of. Should he open it?

He did, and they spread it down on the floor and discussed its appearance. It would probably look pretty funny, Celia thought, along with the junk she had been buying this afternoon.

Her voice was flat with fatigue, and he commented upon it.

"You'd better call it a day, now, and go home to bed," he advised. He must be leaving, himself, since another busy hour of the lunch room was coming on.

"There are two reasons why I must stay," she

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said. "One of them being that I am too tired to stir until I have sat here for a while." She was on the only seat in the place, the step leading up to their alcove bedroom. "And the other that the expressman who's bringing the things from the storage warehouse will be along in a few minutes, and I've got to be here to let him in. Oh, he won't be long, and as soon as he comes I'll go."

Before he left he pulled up a corner of the rug over the step to make it a little softer, and told her how to shut off the stove for the night.

She heard the door close behind him, and almost instantly thereafter, she thought, a violent knocking on it, which seemed, impossibly, to have been going on some time. Also the room was now quite dark, except as it was lighted by the glow through the isinglass door of the stove. It was very bewildering, until she understood that she must have fallen asleep, sitting on that step.

It was then seven o'clock ; a very alcoholic flavor about the two men who had brought her load of furniture accounting, perhaps, for their delay in ar-

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living with it; and it was a quarter to eight before the last article was stowed away and Celia could turn the key on the place.

An even twelve hours ago she had received the second-hand clothing dealer for the purpose of selling him her clothes. It had been a day sure enough. An ampler day, not only in the matter of material activities, but in its emotional content, than any she could remember. The people she'd encountered had seemed more real and alive and human than those her old paths had brought her into casual contact with.

When had any of her conventionally made acquaintances evoked that warm spontaneous glow of friendliness from her that she'd felt when she found Larry Doyle building a fire in her stove, or when the salesman up at Shield's had told her where his mother bought her kitchen things?

The emotions hadn't all been rosy, though, by any means. There had been an instant of cold terror just at the end of the day, when, confronted by that gin-reeking expressman, she had read in

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his look that she was desirable, and alone. She had moved briskly over and thrown open a window upon the busy street, and with that protection had felt safe enough. But the mere breath of that kind of peril had never blown upon her before. Oh, it *had* been a day.

She was so tired, as she made her way to the corner drug-store to call up the house and tell Fred where she was and that she was on her way home, that the mere exertion of walking almost brought tears. But even fatigue couldn't lessen the triumphant sense of achieved adventure.

None of that, naturally, got over the telephone to her husband, and his own tone of poignant anxiety—he had been waiting hours for her to come home and indulging in all sorts of terrors about her—sounded merely querulous to her. He had called up her mother's house two or three times, but they had no word from her. Was that where she was now?

This supposition, naturally again, annoyed Celia. Why should she be at her mother's? She told him,

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without explanation, where she was, and that she was coming straight home now; would get in about nine.

"You can't come home alone from a place like that at this time of night!" And then, quite absurdly, he told her to wait there until he could come in and get her.

This, of course, she flatly declined to do. A street-car that would take her to the station ran right past the door. "I hope you've got your things all packed up," she said by way of a counter-attack. "If you haven't, you'd better get at it now, because everything has got to be out of your closet and your bureau drawers by to-morrow morning. You can pack a trunk with what you'll want to take with you to the flat, and put the rest of the stuff in another trunk that Ruth says we can leave in the attic. I shan't have a minute to do it to-morrow."

She needn't have made that last remark, she knew, and she didn't blame him a bit for slamming the hook down suddenly, the way he did, by way of

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concluding the conversation. Only, the ridiculousness of the notion that, after the things she'd been doing to-day, and been through to-day, she should finish up, like a Jane Austin heroine, by waiting an hour and a half as a concession to the proprieties—because there was, of course, no real danger—so that her husband could escort her home, nettled her a little.

Their meeting, when she got home, at half past nine or so, didn't work much better.

He flung the door open for her as she came up the steps and greeted her with a, "Wherever in the world have you been?"

She gave a limp little laugh and said, "Where haven't I been! My, but I'm tired!"

"Celia," he said, standing in front of her to keep her from walking off, as she showed a disposition to do, "we've *got* to have a talk."

"All right," she said, "but come on out into the kitchen and talk while I eat. I had a lunch about three at Larry Doyle's, but that's all since coffee this morning. I'm starved!"

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Her manner both disconcerted and exasperated him. He had been prepared to meet terrible emotional stresses—tragedy. He felt pretty tragic himself. But nothing of that should be allowed to appear. From now on his dealings with Celia should be marked by gentleness and serenity. And, if she'd been the grief-stricken bewildered object he'd got himself keyed up for, she would have found him exactly that. But, as it was, he cried out:

“Who the deuce is Larry Doyle? And where—where have you been—all these hours?”

She frowned, a little puzzled over his violence, but said: “I’ve been all over the West Side. And Larry Doyle is a dear. Wait till you’ve seen him!”

He said, “Celia, I can’t do it—treat the thing in that manner, I mean. Here we are at the end of everything, and you’re acting as if it was plans for a week-end visit to the country. This is our last chance to decide anything, and—and I want to talk about it seriously. You aren’t so angry with me now as you were, and I think I can make you see that I didn’t mean what you thought the

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other night. At least, not in that offensive way. I want you to consider going back to your father and mother. Not to get rid of me, but to wait. Oh, can't you sit down and listen!"

All the time he talked she had been eating away steadily, and his last exclamation was provoked by her getting up for a raid on the cake-box.

"I'm listening," she said, with her mouth full, it must be admitted. Then, with an effort, and a little bit more clearly: "But it isn't any use, Fred. You agreed to the flat, didn't you?"

"You won't be able to find one that you'd be willing to live in, for any rent I can afford to pay. You've no idea what it would mean; the things you'd have to put up with, the neighbors you'd have, the hardships."

"I don't suppose I do know them all," she admitted, "but I've found a flat and rented it for twelve dollars a month. It's off North Avenue, right near Humboldt Park." She recited the street and number to him. "You'd better write it down," she

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added, "because it's where you live. I've been buying furniture all the afternoon."

Then, at his look of perfectly blank amazement, "Why—didn't you think I meant *anything* I said that night? What do you think I've been doing all the afternoon? Gloomng around like the heroine of *East Lynne*? Do write that address down, Fred, because your dinner—some sort of a dinner—is going to be ready there to-morrow night, at half past six, and I don't want you wandering all over the West Side, not knowing where you live."

She recited the address once more, and stood watching, while he, like an automaton, wrote it down. Then, before he could get his wits together—and she had plenty of time, for they were very thoroughly scattered—she added:

"I'm simply so dead tired and sleepy I can feel my brains slipping around inside my head. I'm going up to bed. Good night."

CHAPTER VI

WHEN HE CAME HOME

IT wasn't quite the real thing, this manner of hers. There was a dash of play-acting in it. But she wasn't conscious, to-night—she was too tired, poor child, to be accurately conscious of anything—of the motive that led her to assume it. In the background of her mind, of course, she knew that she had mislaid her rage against her husband. More than that, had tossed it overboard long ago. She knew that the motive, quite sincerely avowed on the night of the dinner-party—the desire to demonstrate, to his repentance and shame, how outrageously he had misjudged her—had been wearing thinner and thinner every hour, and that it would collapse almost at the first touch. But she didn't want the collapse to happen until she got him fairly into their new home.

There were a multitude of last things to be done

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at the house, of course, the next morning, and she didn't get started on them as early as she might, since she slept fathoms deep till eight o'clock, and only by luck waked up then. So it was near noon before she reached the flat. Six hours and a little more left, and an amount to do that might well have swamped her with dismay.

A description of how the place looked would be lugubrious, and, since I am sure you can imagine it, unnecessary. But Celia was not dismayed, and there was a good reason why. Down below the mere surface of her mind, which was, of course, completely engaged from the moment of her arrival, she was preoccupied with what was going to happen at half past six, and from then on. Marie had brought her a note from Alfred with her breakfast—he, of course, had had to go to town long before she waked up—a note which merely said that he would come at the hour she had given him. All the afternoon, this one fact was vividly in focus. She rehearsed the event a score of different ways. He'd be surprised, no doubt, with what he found,

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curious as to how she had accomplished it, and he'd surely be repentant; especially after he'd found out how completely she had deprived his grievance of any standing ground at all; that she had not, for instance, either gone in debt for the furniture, or used a single bone of what may be called their skeleton of contention—namely, the jewelry—for the purchase of it. Certainly he couldn't object to her having sold her clothes. That was so brilliantly reasonable a thing to have done.

She wouldn't, of course, try to rub her own grievance into him. It wouldn't be necessary. The mere outstanding facts of the situation would cry aloud how he had misjudged her. No, there must be nothing tragic or aggrieved about her manner; nothing virtuous or injured or martyrlike. She must be good-humored and cool. She must act in the manner of one who expects all she has done to be taken for granted—accepted as a matter of course.

All this, until he had acknowledged, in some way or other, how wildly in error he had been in his

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opinion of her, and had, by implication at least, asked her forgiveness. After that—?

Always, when she reached this point in the drama, she found her hands getting shaky, and a stiffness coming into her throat, and with a sort of panicky haste she would ring down the curtain and begin another rehearsal at the point where she heard him coming up the stairs.

But all the resolution at her command wasn't enough to prevent fancies and memories, especially memories, from springing at her; little momentary glimpses of her husband, their context often quite forgotten, just how he'd looked, or how his voice had sounded at one time or another. And when this happened, she'd go very shaky for a minute, and have to wipe her eyes on the sleeve of her big gingham apron, in order to see what she was doing.

At two o'clock, when she went to Larry Doyle's for lunch, it seemed to her that she had made little headway. But he came back with her for an hour, his noon rush being over, and between them they accomplished miracles.

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There was plenty to do, of course, even after that. At five o'clock she locked up the flat and set out, with her last three dollars, to buy food for their evening meal, and—she nearly forgot this—for over Sunday.

She had a surprise up her sleeve here for Alfred. She was, really, despite the misgiving she had confided to Larry Doyle, not a half-bad cook. Years ago, when that first man she had got engaged to was in the ascendent, she had played, in quite a serious manner, at domestic science, and had really discovered a latent talent for cooking. Her dramatic break-up, however, with the man who had inspired these labors, had swept her into other channels, and she'd never gone back. Alfred suspected nothing of this, and it had been part of her program to complete his annihilation, if possible, with a pretty good dinner. The fact that she had to buy enough for five meals, with her three dollars, gave her an excuse, which she was rather glad of, for giving up this project.

At six o'clock, with the table set, the potatoes

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boiling vigorously in their jackets, the slice of ham ready to light the fire under when the moment arrived, she was seized with a panic because there appeared to be nothing to do but wait, and she simply knew she couldn't—not without going all to pieces. Already she could feel the tears coming up and a lump in her throat. It would be infuriating to have everything spoiled now, just in the hour of her triumph, by having him find waiting for him, instead of the good-humored, self-possessed young person she'd been counting on all afternoon, a sob-shaken, semi-liquid, tear-streaked, grimy—

Well, anyway, she could wash her face. That was something to do. And, in the bathroom, she scrubbed away vigorously for five minutes. After that, providentially, she remembered that she had forgotten to slice the bread, and with hands that strangely refused to take a proper hold on anything, she managed to get it done.

Then she decided that the potatoes had boiled long enough, and began peeling them.

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And then, half-way through her second potato, she heard a step on the stairs. It wasn't Alfred. It couldn't be. It wasn't his time—not for fifteen minutes. But it was he! Didn't she know his step? He was coming up heavily—slowly, as though he was tired.

She dropped her knife and the fork that empaled the potato, and put her face down in the crook of her arm. She was so limp she was sure she couldn't stand up. But when she heard the door open she did, and from the doorway of the kitchen she saw him standing in the other.

She saw his gaze travel, dazedly, with a strange, unrealizing wistfulness, from one object to another about the room—from the bright stove with its glowing doors, to the big hollow easy chair, and the little spring rocker with its fringe trimmings opposite it, to the table with the lamp in the middle, and the red checked table-cloth. It was coming around to her now. But before it reached her she saw his eyes fill up with tears.

That was the last thing she saw. She heard him

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saying her name, just as her voice broke over his, and then, somehow, they were in each other's arms.

"Tighter!" she said.

They had their talk, to be sure, but it wasn't until a good deal later. You can compute roughly how much later, from the fact that the potatoes were absolutely stone cold, and had to be warmed up in the frying-pan before they could begin their supper; that they ate at last, in the inconstant and preoccupied manner of honeymoon lovers, and that they washed up the dishes in the same way.

But after all that, and after they had rectified, temporarily, Celia's total omission to provide curtains or shades, with a sheet pinned up over each of the two front windows, they got down to a bathrobe and bedroom-slipper basis, settled together in the big hollow chair, and told each other all about everything; what they'd really meant by things they'd said and done and omitted to do, and what each had thought the other meant, and what a pair of sillies they had been. And Celia wound it up by

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narrating, though not just as I have done here, how she'd spent the time since Thursday morning.

At last, blissfully content, and a little drowsy, she began asking him questions; if he was glad that it had all happened just as it had, down to the very least particular. *She* was, she said. There was nothing, not the smallest thing, that she would want changed.

She couldn't get him to go as far as that. "There were things I said to you that night," he insisted, "and things I—I couldn't quite deny I meant, that I'd give a good deal to wipe off the slate."

"Oh, but that," she said, sitting up suddenly, "is the very best part of it. That's what's done it all, don't you see? We might have gone on for years and never—never really been married at all, if we hadn't, in our rage, turned in and torn the—the husks off each other, so that we could see what we really were. You were right about me, you know, horribly right. That was what made me so furious. And it was true that you weren't the man I



"Tighter!" she said

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married. Oh, but it's all right, silly, don't you see? Because I'm not the girl you married, either."

He protested at this. She was the same Celia, only now, for the first time, he saw her with open eyes.

But she, quite dispassionately, stuck to her point. "Surely I ought to know," she insisted, sitting up straight and rubbing her sleepy eyes. "I remember that girl well. I remember how annoyed and shocked she was when she found the new girl—the new me, you know—falling in love with you, in—in a new way which she didn't think quite ladylike. And the new one was rather scared and easily imposed upon, and she might never have got away at all, if you hadn't come along—the new you, remember; not prosperous and self-contained, and—don't mind—*noble* at all, but just raw and real and human, and fighting mad, and turned her loose."

He still wanted to laugh her out of this fancy, but she was very much in earnest about it.

"You must believe it," she insisted. "And you must never forget it. You mustn't treat me like the

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old Celia. The old one never liked to be —*next* to things, or people, but I do. I love it." She paused to illustrate. "I've just come alive, don't you see, and found out what a wonderful thing it is. P—please say that you're new too, and that this, to-night, is the beginning of everything."

"The beginning of everything," he echoed.

For the former things were passed away.

So ends the first chapter of this episode in the life of the Alfred Blairs.

CHAPTER VII

INTERLUDE

“WE will sing,” the preacher says, “the first and third stanza, omitting the second.”

There are three chapters in this fragment of Celia’s and Alfred’s story; but we, at the conclusion of the first, are going to proceed directly to the third. Blessed is the nation which has no history. And blessed, for the same reason, is the family which doesn’t give the novelist a chance.

The three months which followed Celia’s finding and renting and furnishing of the flat make up this second chapter. To Alfred and Celia it remains the outstanding one, and when they are old, I fancy they’ll still talk to each other about it. As they see it retrospectively, it is their period of pure romance—three golden honeymoons strung on a silver wire.

Please don’t take me as saying that I consider

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poverty a romantic lark, or even the perilously close approach to poverty that is spelled by an income, for two people, of twenty-two and a half dollars a week.

But the Blairs were not really so poor as they made out. They had, for the present, plenty of good serviceable clothes; they had in certain prospect, though they carefully avoided looking at it, the income from their house. And, too, down in the bottom of the mind of each, though neither ever admitted it, was the consciousness that this state of things was transitory, and really terminable at will.

There is no denying that this consciousness changed the quality of their adventure a little, spiced it faintly with the flavor of make-believe. It was easier, for example, to make a joke of it, when a mistake in the budget reduced them, for four whole days, to a famine ration; or to smile, as they stood together outside an enticing motion-picture theater around on North Avenue, and had, forlornly, to admit that they had exhausted their amusement appropriation for this week.

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I don't mean that they enjoyed these experiences. They honestly went hungry. They endured a genuine disappointment over not seeing Charlie Chaplin in his burlesque of Geraldine Farrar. But these pangs could be looked at as isolated phenomena, not as the omens of a dreary future; which made an enormous difference.

The most delicious thing about their new mode of life was, perhaps, its intimacy. They had never lived intimately before, and this fact had a deeper-lying cause than Celia's—the old Celia's—aloofness or her husband's shyness; this was the spirit of the social group of which they formed a part. No group in the whole social system is so enslaved by its own conventions as this prosperous, rising, suburban class. It is the determination to rise, of course, that does it. The smaller group, just above, which has reached what it considers the summit, can afford to relax a little; can even, within rigorous limits, of course, make a feature of its indifference to what other people think of its actions.

But Celia and her friends and their husbands,

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with a summit in sight just ahead, had to keep in the procession. The number and variety of their entertainments were regimented with almost military precision. They gave one another more or less the same dinners and lunches; they followed one another, sheeplike, into the same recreations, the same charities; read the same books, discussed the same ideas. And, since their lives, in a sharply bounded suburban community, were very visible to one another, they conformed pretty much to the same domestic code—subscribed to the same standards.

Well, and intimacy was distinctly not good form among them. The notion sprang, perhaps, from novels about the English aristocracy. Anyhow, between husbands and wives, the proper manner was one of rather hostile indifference. The sort of things they were to say to each other when others were about were sharp little witticisms.

And this attitude carried itself over into their private life, an imposition guaranteed by their servants, who were hired from one house to another, and who formed almost as close a society as they

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did. That a husband and wife should have separate rooms to dress and sleep in was a matter of elementary decency.

The three-room flat, of course, put an end to all that in more senses than one. Their one bedroom was just an alcove, really, separable by curtains—as yet unprovided—from their living-room. When they turned the key in the door at the head of the stairs, they were as secure against intrusion as a pair of pioneer settlers on a prairie. And they reverted, in many respects, to the simplicity of peasants.

But the astonishing discovery that they made was that this material intimacy flowered out into a spiritual intimacy that neither of them had dreamed of before. You couldn't pretend much at close quarters like that. You couldn't nurse a grievance behind a politely intangible manner, or a noble, long-suffering dignity. There was no standard, not their own, that they must be always acting with deference to. And the consequence was that things got said out, that they came to know not only each

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other's minds, but their own. They had occasional sharp little quarrels, like the explosion of fire-crackers, during which they said and did things to each other which would inexpressibly have shocked their respectable friends. But these encounters left no after-effects; no virtuous, self-pitying sulks.

They began, now that they had stopped trying to live up to anything, to have real fun—a rather rowdy, rough-and-tumble sort of fun, a good deal of it due perhaps to their extensive patronage of the movies. This was their theory of it, anyway.

The movies, of course, weren't their only form of entertainment. They took extraordinary street-car rides. It's amazing, you know, how amusing a street-car ride can be to a jovially minded, rather outrageously behaved pair, snuggled together on one of the back seats and guessing, in whispers, most grotesquely and injuriously sometimes, about the condition and business of other passengers. It is possible to work a variant on the game, too, by getting on separately, at different corners, and then

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elaborately making each other's acquaintance, to the scandal of the car, and getting off together.

Celia was really shocked, though, one night, when Alfred suggested that they go to a dance-hall. Certain friends of Celia's, in her former incarnation, made it almost their one business in life to crush out the dance-hall evil; or if not to crush it out, at least to step sharply and disconcertingly on its toes, and as a result of their reports concerning their slumming investigations, Celia had got the idea that all dance-halls were sinks of unbridled iniquity.

Alfred confessed he didn't know much about it himself, but he passed on the remark of a friend of his—a man who knew the brightly lighted world very well: "The majority of people in any of those places are decent. Or, at least, they're acting decently at any given moment." He said that was what made all these stage and moving-picture productions of fast restaurants and tough dances so ridiculously unreal. They probably weren't, Al-

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fred concluded, so black as they were painted. Anyhow, he and Celia could try and see.

The place they hit upon was, to the eyes of their innocence at least, perfectly harmless—they never stayed very late, it's true—and they enjoyed occasional evenings there prodigiously. It was rather an extravagance, of course.

The best amusement of all came a little later, when the fine spring weather really set in. Alfred came home, guiltily, one night, with two pairs of roller-skates. Neither of them had attempted this amusement since childhood, but, after one experimental and rather painful evening, they got on very well. The park near by afforded an admirable place for it. Sometimes they swung along arm in arm, rhythmically—romantically. Sometimes, in a scandalous fashion, they mixed themselves up in a miscellaneous game of tag that one was pretty sure to find going on in one of the larger squares. All told, there is no doubt that their standard of civilization deteriorated very much. It was surprising how much younger they got.

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This change in her husband was an astonishing thing to Celia.

"The man I married," she confided to him one night, leaning her elbows on the back of his chair, and getting both hands, with a good tight grip, into his hair—he was like a big dog in enjoying the rougher and more unceremonious sort of caresses—"the man I married, you know, was middle-aged, safe and sane, and awfully dignified; 'always wholly serious,' the way Mrs. Humphrey Ward wanted her uncle Matthew to be. But you, you're just a big schoolboy—a rather outrageous sort of schoolboy, too." And, indeed, it was true that the way he had been acting all the evening, ever since he'd come home from work, warranted the indictment.

He puzzled her, though, by turning rather grave and reflective about it. She leaned down for a better look at him, then came round and curled up in his lap.

"Silly," she said, "don't try to pretend you don't know how I love to have you like that!"

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He pulled her up in a voluminous embrace that was still a little absent-minded.

"No, it wasn't that," he said. "I was thinking of something. Your speaking of a schoolboy reminded me of it. You know, I've been trying, off and on, ever since this happened—ever since that Saturday night when I found you here, to think what it was like. It was like something that had happened once before, I knew, but I couldn't get hold of it. Now I have.

"It was when I was in fifth grade—about ten years old, I must have been—and I had a teacher that couldn't stand me. I don't know that I blame her so very much, after all. I was pretty slow and grubby, much as you'd expect me to have been, and I didn't get on at all. My special nightmare was arithmetic, which is queer, considering." The consideration was, though he didn't explain this to Celia, that he had, really, an uncanny talent for mathematics. "I've made up my mind since, that it wasn't the mathematical part of the problems I couldn't understand, but the English they were ex-



“The man I married was middle-aged, safe and sane.
You’re just a big schoolboy”

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pressed in. However, that was no help to me at the time. I was the teacher's horrible example. She used to say, over some uncommon piece of stupidity by some one else, 'Why, even Alfred Blair wouldn't have done that.' "

Celia made a little shudder of disgust. "How you must have hated her!" she said. Then, suspiciously, "That teacher isn't going to turn out to be me, is she?"

He answered the second question with a "Wait and see," but to the first, he replied more thoughtfully. "No, I hadn't the satisfaction of hating her. If I could have taken her personally, that would have been easy. But she wasn't personal at all. She was—teacher—you see? Destiny. All I could do was just despair.

"Well, it got worse and worse, and one morning, on the way to school, with a hopeless lesson ahead of me that I hadn't even tried to get, I made up my mind to quit. I'd have to do some desperate deed first, to get myself expelled from school, because otherwise I'd be made to go back. Then I'd

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go and be a newsboy. I remember standing still, in the middle of the sidewalk, and solemnly swearing to myself—I think I said ‘God damn’—that I’d do it. Then I walked on, trying to make up my mind what I’d do.

“I considered pretty nearly everything, up to the actual assassination of the teacher, but the particular crime wasn’t really picked out when I got to the school.

“Well—here’s the point at last—when I got there, there was a card on the door. There’d been a case of smallpox and the school was closed until further notice.

“I’ll never forget that walk home from school. There’d been a miracle that had changed the whole look of the world. You can imagine changing in ten minutes from a prospective criminal who’d got to get himself expelled from school, in order to go and be a newsboy, to a kid on his way home on the first morning of an uncharted vacation. A prospector striking pay-ore is nothing to that, anyway. And to me— Well, there you are. That’s

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the nearest approach to how I've felt since—since this happened."

She squeezed up a little closer to him. "I expect I was the teacher, though," she said.

He gave a laugh at that. "No, you lamb," he said. "You were the smallpox notice."

Celia pondered a good deal upon this parable during the following days. It illuminated many things. A schoolboy, reveling in an unforeseen holiday! That gave her the clue, not only to his present state of mind, but to what his state of mind must have been during the months that preceded the crash. Indeed, ever since their marriage—their engagement—before that, perhaps.

That serious, sober, responsible way of his wasn't all her doing, of course. He had never, for one thing, enjoyed the four years of sunlit irresponsibility, which is what most men manage to get out of their term at college. He'd been shouldering heavy burdens through all that time. He was in the way of taking burdens for granted. That was why he hadn't revolted at the burden his marriage had

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been. Perhaps if he had come to her confidently expecting the simple satisfactions he craved, she might have given them to him. It made her sick now to think how she'd starved him with her chilly superiorities and restraints, her little lectures and her ladylikeness—the smooth, finely laundered garment of unruffled conventionality she had always worn before him.

His still incredulous delight in her new ways with him, with the commentary it carried on what their old life had meant to him, was poignant to her almost to the point of tears. She *was* the school-teacher in that allegory, although the smallpox card as well, and the playground of his holiday.

Well, he deserved a holiday, poor dear, and she meant to make it last as long as she could.

But it's the essence of holidays, that they come to an end—a point she'd thought of, but not pressed, when he told her the parable. One had to go back to school some time. How would he like the new teacher he'd find when he went back?

The thing she was sure he didn't realize, and that

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she meant, if possible, to keep him from finding out, was that their new life ~~was~~ was not a letting-out of school for her; was, on the contrary, the beginning of school—the first real school she'd ever gone to. That he didn't, apparently, even suspect it was due to the fact that school-hours ended for her with his return from the office. From then on, whether at a movie-show, or dance-hall, or roller-skating in the park, she was as gay and irresponsible as he. In the morning, too, for that matter, when the alarm-clock routed them sleepily out of bed, and they dressed and got breakfast simultaneously, all over the place.

But from seven-thirty, when he started downtown, until the hour of his return, life to Celia was an intensely serious business. It was a business that could easily have been hatefully dull and disagreeable. Under her old system of dealing with nettles, stroking them just gingerly enough to get the maximum sting with the minimum effect upon the nettle, she could, in a week, have come to regard herself as a dismally abused martyr.

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Cooking wasn't so bad, though it was exasperating to discover that every ingredient that made things taste good was expensive. But washing dishes! The new Celia shared the opinion of the old—that the nastiest substance in the world was greasy dish-water. She hated the way it was spoiling her hands. Her feet and ankles were getting spoiled, too. They would spread and thicken to appalling proportions, if this life kept up long enough. She was pretty soft, of course, all over, and during the first fortnight she was discovering new muscles all the time that she had never known existed until they began to ache.

Her spirit ached, too, sometimes, more excruciatingly than her muscles. Determination and dash didn't always win you a victory. And when you were defeated, you did feel such a fool. To cite a single instance: there was a disastrous day when she tackled the wash. She'd blithely sent it out to the nearest laundry the first week, and, since it hadn't occurred to either of them that it was possible to economize in this direction, the hole this

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made in their free assets for the week was shocking. There were holes, too, in other things. This laundry evidently didn't understand the nature of silk pajamas. So, with an undaunted air, but feeling very hollow inside, Celia told herself that of course it was ridiculous for a woman in her position not to do her own washing.

Her direst forebodings were more than borne out by the event. There was, it appeared, a technique in this business which her own experience—limited to the washing-out of sheer little blouses and handkerchiefs, had not provided her with. And the horrible fatigue of it! Before she had even finished the washing part, her back ached as if she had broken it.

And when it came to the ironing! Well, if you're curious, just try to iron a pair of double bed-sheets by hand yourself. Before she got through with them, those two sheets represented a vast, illimitable acreage—enough for a country estate. Then, Alfred had a horrible predilection for the very thinnest kind of gauzy woolen underwear and socks,

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which had to be bathed as tenderly as a young baby.

She told him, when he came home that night, with a hysterical attempt at jocularly, that he'd have to wash those things for himself thereafter. Perhaps they'd let him go in swimming with them on, in the public bathhouse in the park. They could dry on him then and perhaps not shrink.

The problem was solved by a compromise. They learned to be less reckless about using things that had to be washed, and the flat things were sent out to the laundry.

But I'm not going into the details of Celia's schooling. They'd be voluminous. Literally, what she didn't know when she took on the job of being a wage-earner's wife would fill a book. Anyway, that isn't the story.

But her spiritual attitude toward those hard lessons is a part of the story. That she kept herself from sagging and drudging through them, and submitting, by this attitude, to a spiritual defeat, was due mostly to two causes. One of them was

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the consciousness that she was—putting it over with Alfred, to an extent she hadn't dreamed of when she made the threat the night of the dinner-party.

He'd been dangerously near right in the opinion of her he'd unconsciously expressed that night. The old Celia, if she hadn't been burnt to ashes in the fire of the new Celia's wrath, might easily enough have done just what her husband had expected she would.

But you couldn't make Alfred believe that now—not on the oath of the Recording Angel. He was still in the depths of contrition, as far as so happy a man could be, over the injustice he'd done her. And a contrite husband, aware that he has never, until now, appreciated you, is a much more stimulating companion to live with than an aggrieved but nobly forgiving one. It was a wonderful stimulus, living up to his new and still wondering opinion of her.

There was another, which she was less conscious of. This new life of hers had, extraordinarily, the

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quality of being alive. It was real. It took hold. The things she did were effectual. They made things come out differently from the way they'd otherwise have come out.

Take the matter of economy. There was so much money—real money, not an impalpable bank-balance—to meet their current necessities through the week. The amount of that which she had left on Saturday night was what they could have fun with through the next week. There was always a vivid emotion of triumph, or of chagrin, when it came to displaying that residuum to her husband.

This same quality of vividness characterized, indeed, pretty much everything about her new life. The experiences of that interminable, wonderful day, when she had sold her clothes and bought the furniture had been true omens.

She had expected to be lonely; and, in the social sense, of course, she was. For none of their suburban friends had been given a corrected version of the story of a flight out west somewhere, that had been made up for Ruth Collier. But, to her aston-

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ishment, she found herself tasting the joys of real companionship as she had never known them before. I don't mean with Alfred, but during the daytime, while he was at the office—casual people who sold her things in the little shops, people she met day after day during her afternoon breathing in the park. Foremost of these, an old Garibaldian gardener. Then there was the librarian at the substation of the public library, and the cadaverous-looking Russian boy who brought them a loaf of whole-wheat bread every other afternoon, and who she discovered to be an absolutely authentic Nihilist. And, first and always, Larry Doyle with his idolized youngest daughter, who went to business college, and the son, who was a trouble-man in the employ of the telephone company. They all came closer, somehow—gave her more and took more from her, than people in the old life, whom she'd called by their first names for years.

Figuratively, she and those old acquaintances had always felt one another through gloves. Well,

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now, imagine the sensations of a person who has always worn gloves, whose hands have never known contact with anything except the inside of his gloves. Imagine his sensations when he first took them off; how sharp and exciting they would be—painful, sometimes, but worth the pain. That will give you a notion of Celia. She had just come alive. There it is in two words.

Coming alive, she began experiencing a strong emotional interest in live things—growing things; the vegetation of the young spring, so tenderly nourished by the old gardener in the park. He so old, but getting a fresh vicarious life out of his plants.

She experienced in herself a longing to make things grow. Window-boxes in the flat, that was her first idea, which expanded to a day-dream of an acre, not too far from town for Alfred, where, while he was away at work, she could have flowers and garden vegetables—chickens.

But that was only the fringe of the idea. The core of it she didn't reach till a little later. She



Before her eyes was a mother, nursing a baby

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came upon it, one afternoon, in the park, and stopped with a sob too sudden to be repressed. She knew now what the growing thing was she really wanted. Before her eyes was a common enough sight, a mother—Italian, she looked—sitting on one of the benches nursing a baby.

CHAPTER VIII

GERMINATION

IT was this discovery of hers, really, that marked the end of the second chapter—for Celia, anyway. The growing strength of her new desire carried her along like the current of a river. The gratification of it would mean an end to her husband's holiday. They couldn't have a baby in a place like this. He must have space, and clean sweet air and sunshine; that acre, if possible, and a cow.

She dwelt on the details of the dream lovingly. But she hesitated over telling her husband about it, partly from a new shyness which made it sweet to keep the wonder of it to herself for a while, partly from the very clear realization of what the accomplishment of it would require from her husband. Often, during the first few weeks of their life here, he had spoken to her of the wonderful relief it was having merely routine work to do—no responsibil-

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ity beyond the mere carrying out of his instructions, after all those months of maddening worry.

The undertaking of a baby would mean, of course, the end of all that; would involve the exercise of more imaginative and better-paid powers. She shrank from asking him to begin looking about for a more responsible job, even for the reason she would have to offer. She wouldn't want to name this new mysterious desire of hers in that connection at all. Of course, she might not have to. He might see the necessity for himself. But, equally, he might not. Men were ignorant about such matters. It might not strike him that they couldn't have a baby right here, in this teeming neighborhood, with scarlet fever, whooping cough and measles lurking in every street-car and along the benches in the park. And perhaps pretty soon he'd end his holiday of his own accord.

She'd noticed something a little different about him lately—unexplained preoccupations, the cessation of casual chat about the deeds of his fellow draftsmen and the routine of his office work. So,

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for a while, with a patience that was new to her, she waited. Then this happened.

One hot Saturday night, after they'd virtuously decided to do up the dishes in order to leave their holiday to-morrow as free as possible, but still hung lazily over the supper-table while they summoned resolution enough to put the disagreeable job through, Alfred said:

"I had a funny encounter in the street to-day; ran into Major March." But he didn't go on from there, as he might have been expected to, so she said:

"I don't believe I ever heard of the major. Who is he?"

"Not *the* major," he corrected. "Major. It's his first name. He's a queer genius of an inventor. I had an idea I'd told you about him. You know, I think a man ought to be able to get heavy damages from his parents for naming him Major when his last name was going to be March. Some people seem to go out of their way to make people ridiculous with the names they give them."

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"Was he the inventor," Celia asked, "who was going to make your everlasting fortune and didn't—the one you gave the fifteen thousand dollars to?"

He shot a look at her, and said, with a laugh, "Yes, that's the man. But I didn't realize I'd told you about my having gone in with him. I thought I'd kept that pretty dark."

"You told me about it," she explained, "the night of that last dinner-party, when you told me such a lot of things." She went on, after a moment's silence. "What did he say to-day? Did he tell you that his great invention was coming out right, after all?"

Once more he looked at her in that rather odd way—surprised, but rather more than that—almost startled. But then he laughed.

"Not exactly. It was the old story. He needed just two thousand dollars more. That was all that stood between him and untold wealth. He'd got his big people interested. He'd got the thing right beyond the shadow of a doubt. But he had to dem-

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onstrate it to them with some rather elaborate laboratory tests. The two thousand was to be for that. Then all his trouble's over."

"Do you suppose it's true?" she asked.

"Oh, there's no doubt he thinks so. The poor little cuss is the soul of honor. And lord! He may be right about it. Very likely he is. He sounded quite convincing."

There was a little pause, then he went on, with a smile. "I'd never admit that, if there were the slightest possibility of my giving him the money. I've had my lesson, and I don't need to be taught it twice. But as long as the possibility doesn't exist—" He broke off there, thinking she meant to speak, but if she had she'd changed her mind about it.

"Come along," he said. "Let's get through the dishes."

But she detained him with an outstretched hand. "Let's fix the budget first," she said.

It was their Saturday night routine to take his pay-envelope and divide its contents into various

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funds to cover the next week's expenditures. But to-night, upon her asking for it, his face went suddenly blank. Then:

"Good gracious!" he said. "I forgot to tell you. They've given me another raise. Thirty a week now. What do you think of that?"

"Oh, that's great!" she cried. "Let's see it."

"I haven't got it," he said. "I expect they mean to pay me by check from now on. Thirty a week counts as salary instead of wages."

Her face paled a little, and she had to swallow the lump in her throat before she could speak.

"That's true, isn't it, Fred?" she asked. "You—you aren't trying to spare me something? You haven't—lost your job?"

He came around the table quickly and took her in his arms. "No, I haven't lost my job," he said. "I give you my word for that. Were you really frightened?"

She pulled in a long breath and let it out explosively. That answered him.

"But look here, Fred," she said earnestly.

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"Wouldn't they be willing to go on giving it to you in the same way—in real money, in an envelope, every Saturday night? That's the basis of everything, you see—knowing what we've got and what we've got to do without."

He admitted she was right and said he'd get them to do it that way. He was sure they wouldn't mind.

She dismissed, vigorously and contemptuously, from her mind a thought that popped into it, of the contrast between the manner in which he had made this announcement to-night and that with which he had told her of his former rise from the original twenty-two fifty to twenty-five. He'd shouted his news to her from the doorway that other time, and waved his envelope at her—extracted and displayed, in all their glory, the five, flat, new, five-dollar bills. And they'd spent that evening calculating, with the most minute exactitude, how they'd spend that surplus two dollars and fifty cents in a riotous celebration the next day. Certainly things hadn't gone like that to-night, and the

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change might well be thought significant of something.

But it was easier to refrain from speculating about it because her mind was so well occupied by something else—a fascinating breath-taking possibility, which wouldn't consent to be dismissed as absurd; that came back, at all events, every time she did dismiss it that way, with more assurance about itself, more the air of a serious plan. It kept her awake a long time that night. It, and the necessity for lying very rigorously still, in order not to disturb Fred. When at last she did move, she found he'd been awake all the time.

He said, without preface, "Celia, are you getting tired of it?"

She asked, "Of what?" though somehow she knew.

"Of living like this. Of the flat, and cooking, and washing dishes. Are you beginning to hate it?"

"Why, I love it," she cried, with a little catch

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in her voice. "Surely you know that. I've never been so happy. Life's never meant so much. Only—" Her voice faded out there and there was a long silence—minutes, it seemed.

Then, as if out of a stiff throat, he asked, "Only what?"

With a little sob she wound her arms around him and nestled close. "Nothing—yet," she said.

With that answer he seemed content.

She was content, too, and soon fell happily asleep. Because now her mind was made up. The fascinating possibility had become a resolution.

On Monday morning, about half past eight, after the breakfast things were out of the way, she drew out of the bottom of Alfred's trunk, where it had lain hidden beneath some things he hadn't happened to want, a package whose solidly rectangular form was still indifferently disguised by the clumsy wrappings it had worn when it had lain on the floor between a furiously angry husband and wife, who had, respectively, refused in the most

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passionate manner to avail themselves of the opportunities it offered.

Celia looked at it with a rueful smiling memory of the row it had precipitated. It was still entitled to be called the skeleton in their closet, since it had never been mentioned by either of them since that morning.

She dressed as well as she could, then set off down-town with the package under her arm. There were only two questions in her mind now. Could she sell it, this jewelry of hers, for two thousand dollars? And if she could not, would that inventor be able to get on with a little less?

CHAPTER IX

ALFRED, MEANWHILE

C ELIA might well have given more weight than she did to that new preoccupied manner of her husband's, and she might have taken more seriously than she did the contrast between his offhand way of announcing that his pay had been raised from twenty-five to thirty dollars a week, and his previous excitement over the announcement that it had been raised to twenty-five. She would have done so, no doubt, but for that preoccupation of her own about which I have told you. But even if she had allowed speculation to run riot—gone to her inferential limit, she'd hardly have come abreast of the facts.

For a month, indeed, after Alfred Blair had taken his new job, he had, just as he told her, reveled in the irresponsibility of it. He had sat over his table from eight to twelve, and from one to five, doing the work before him with an almost contemp-

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tuous ease, exercising a set of faculties that a long and early training had almost transmuted into instincts, while the inner man of him rejoiced in long-drawn breaths and the delicious relaxation of racked nerves. He was like a man washed ashore from a wreck, exhausted by the struggle with tempestuous seas, content to lie for a while on the sun-warmed sands, incurious as to what his new island domain might have in store for him.

The first stirrings of curiosity he repressed severely. Each time he caught his mind reaching out to grasp the essentials of the work he was doing, criticizing the engineering of his superiors, deciding how the thing really ought to be done, he checked the impulse vigorously. It was none of his business whether the job was done right or wrong, economically or extravagantly. Had he ever been as happy in his life before as he was right now? Well then, why spoil a good thing? Hadn't he had enough worry and trouble in the past year and a half to last him—a while longer, anyway? He had. As a means of further reassuring him-

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self on this point, he had talked to Celia about the pleasure he was taking in the routine nature of his work.

But he couldn't keep this up indefinitely. To the trained athlete it is unendurable not to exercise. Heart, lungs and muscles cry aloud for the tests they are accustomed to. And the man who has made trained athletes of his judgment and imagination can't leave them out of his reckoning indefinitely. They'll begin taking hold some day, in spite of him. They won't be satisfied, either, by the mere acknowledgment on his part, of the possibility or the rightness of the things they have pointed out to him. They'll never let him alone until he has harnessed all his energy to the task of making the possibilities they have pointed out come true.

Do you remember—I'm sure you will if you're old enough—the classical story of the young princess and her pet tiger? It was either in the third reader or the fourth, I can't be sure which. At all events, the tiger was a perfectly amiable beast and

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enjoyed the complete confidence of the princess, the secret being that his diet was confined to milk and biscuits. But one day, in a fit of affection, he began licking the princess's hand, and his rough tongue presently wore through the skin, so that he tasted blood. Whereupon, without remorse, he proceeded to eat up the princess.

I don't claim perfection for my analogy, since the princess of my tale is the oily, toothpick-chewing foreman of the drafting-room, whom I introduced to you in the act of hiring Alfred Blair. The parallel would be closer, too, if the tiger in the legend were not an innocent cub, but a reformed man-eater, who had gone upon a milk diet voluntarily. Apart from these defects, however, the thing works out pretty well, since it was a purely good-natured impulse to help his manifestly incompetent superior by showing him how a certain detail really ought to be managed, that led Alfred to take his first taste of blood; that is, of responsibility.

I don't know whether the tiger was surprised or not when he discovered that he had eaten the prin-

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cess. I do know that Alfred was genuinely astonished over the discovery that he had, inadvertently, eaten the foreman. He got, that is to say, this unfortunate gentleman's job.

That's what happened, however—quite inevitably, if one stops to think about it—within a fortnight from the time when he ventured to correct that first detail.

I don't know whether you will consider the other first step he took that day to have been inevitable also. I'm afraid not, without some explanation. The step was—and it proved quite as important as the other—that he refrained from telling Celia about his promotion when he got home the evening of the day it happened.

I won't attempt to deny that he ought to have told her; that it was cowardly and evasive of him; and, I'm afraid I must add, decidedly masculine, not to tell. He got adequately punished for it in the event, as you are to be told. But while you are waiting for that to happen to him let me try to show you how it looked and felt to him.

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In the first place, he was informed of his promotion the moment he arrived in the office one morning. If they'd told him the last thing before he left for home the night before, I haven't a doubt he'd have gone straight to Celia with it. As it happened, he had a day to look his new job over before he went home, and it made him pretty sick.

He'd suspected the truth about this big municipal contract from the day he was hired. And he'd been getting little fragmentary glimpses of it from day to day at his own drafting-board. But from his more elevated position as superintendent of the drafting-room, with only one engineer between himself and the contractor, he now saw the thing in all its naked effrontery. It was the familiar formula for municipal work: fifty per cent. graft, fifty per cent. incompetence.

The maddening thing about it was, too, that, but for the incompetence, the graft would not be necessary. A man of decent ability, with that contract in his pocket, could deliver the city an honest job and make as much legitimate profit out of it

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as this shifty numb-witted grafter could hope to steal.

The position Alfred's incautious display of talent had got him into was the proverbially uncomfortable one between the upper and the nether millstones. He could no longer absolve himself, as he had done at his drafting-board, from all responsibility for the job. They'd picked him up and made him responsible. Yet they hadn't given him authority to change a thing that really mattered.

If you will imagine Hercules, with a tin bucket and a scrubbing-brush, getting his first sight and whiff of the Augean stables, you will have some notion of Alfred Blair's state of mind.

It's important to remember that he was Hercules—was in the habit, anyhow, of dealing with things in a Herculean way, turning the course of rivers through them, if necessary. What I mean is that he really was, down inside, despite the temporary eclipse of the past few months, the successful, audacious, highly energized big-caliber man that Celia married; a man accustomed to carrying heavy loads

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of responsibility upon his capacious shoulders; to the exercise of a trenchant and unquestioned authority; to the accomplishment of big things in big ways.

Yesterday a private in the ranks, he had been able—though barely—to keep alive the pretense that the big man Celia had married was, as he had told her the night of the dinner-party, done for, never to come back. To-day, with a sergeant's chevron on his sleeve, the pretense was demolished. He knew to-day that he had come back—that his old powers had come back. And the knowledge disturbed him painfully.

All the way out to the little flat that evening he fretted over the situation. He wouldn't be able to stand the new job very long. It would be really maddening. Eventually—likely enough within the next few days—he'd find himself locking horns with the chief engineer, telling him to go to hell; putting on his coat and walking out. Well, and then what could he do? Try for another routine job at twenty-five a week?

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He wouldn't let himself admit that this was not a real alternative. Down inside he knew so well that it was not, that he told himself it was with most unnecessary emphasis. Put it all in a word and say that he was in a stew—a stew that kept getting hotter as the packed elevated train jolted and creaked around its curves.

At his station he squeezed his way out automatically and started at a rapid walk for home. The little street they lived in was still radiating the heat of an unseasonably early summer's day. It radiated noise, too, from a hurdy-gurdy and a ball game, and from some long-distance visiting that was going on back and forth across the street.

Usually Alfred liked this; reflecting, perhaps, Celia's warm delight in it. But to-night he strode through it all unheeding, except as perhaps the heat and the confusion added a few degrees to the temperature of his interior stew. He walked fast because, when he got to a certain door—the door his latch-key fitted, a miracle was going to happen. It happened every night, and yet it remained none

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the less a miracle. He never missed a moment of exquisite fear just before he opened the door, lest to-night it wouldn't happen. The miracle was, quite simply, that after he'd opened that door and stepped inside, he was in a place called home—a place unique in all the world—a place of ineffable security against all possible assaults of the world. To-night, more than ever, he was hungry and impatient for it.

It didn't always happen in exactly the same way. Sometimes Celia was cooking something noisy in the kitchen so that she didn't hear him until his latch-key clicked in the door at the head of the stairs. But other times she heard him at the outer door and had the inner one open for him before he was half-way up.

This was what happened to-night, and he got his first hug out on the landing. They squeezed through the narrow doorway in one lump. Then she held him off for a look.

"You're tired to-night," she said. "Almost worried. Right up there." The spot she indicated

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with her lips was between his eyebrows. "Nothing's—gone wrong to-day, has it?"

"Never less in the world," he assured her. And, if she'd waited a second, he might have gone on and said the thing right out. But she went straight on and supplied an explanation for herself.

"It's just the heat, of course. That made you want to smoke, and the smoker was packed—"

He pushed her away a little. "I must be a pretty loathsome object, and no mistake — sweaty and dirty, with a little more beard than usual on account of the heat, and then that smoking-car was the limit! I ought to have freshened up a bit before I let you come close."

Her answer was to give a contented little laugh, hug him up as tight as she could, and cuddle her face down against his chest. "Do you suppose I mind?" she said. "Do you mind *me* the way *I* am?"

She wore, as she usually did at this time of day, a big all-over apron with short sleeves, instead of a dress, and a little cap that she could tuck all of her hair into.

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His answer didn't require any words, but his memory gave him a lightning flash of a contrasting situation between them—the time he'd come home on the eve of that last dinner-party of theirs, come home to tell her that he was through with the life they'd been living; that he'd endured it up to the last day, and that this was it. He'd found her half-dressed before her toilet-table, with all her sensuously alluring paraphernalia about her—the rose-colored stockings and slippers which matched the gown which lay across the foot of the bed—the perfume of her powder subtly pervading the air as he came close and asked her for a kiss. She had drawn sharply away from him, charged him with having ridden out in the smoker, and wondered what unspeakable tobacco men smoked in such places. Then she had urged him to hurry along and dress, because there wasn't time to fool, really.

That girl, against whom his resentment had flared almost to the temperature of hatred, had been—well, not his same Celia, but she had had his Celia locked up inside her, waiting to break out

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when the shock of their disaster should give her a chance.

The pungent odor of the gingham, or whatever it was that her big apron was made of, gave him a thrill that none of the perfumes of the old days had been capable of giving, and there was a soft contented warmth in her voice. There clutched at his heart a passionate fear, and a passionate resolve—the fear lest the new prosperity which loomed ahead of him should carry them back into that old artificial life where they lived, not together, but in two separate shells; the resolve that at all costs, this thing should not be allowed to happen.

He'd say nothing of the promotion to Celia for—well, three or four days or a week. The situation at the office would probably have taken definite shape by the end of a fortnight, anyway.

He went on to tell himself, virtuously, how much kinder it was to Celia not to tease her with the story of a promotion which so easily might prove illusory. Of course, if the thing worked out all right, or showed even an inclination to do so, he'd tell her

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at once. He angrily cast off the insinuation which sneaked into his mind from somewhere that it might be a good thing to keep Celia seriously in the dark for any length of time as to his improved fortunes. What was he making all the fuss about, anyhow? It wasn't an important decision he'd just taken. What did it matter whether he told her to-night or three nights from now? Perhaps he would tell her to-night, after all. But he didn't.

For a week the state of things in the drafting-room remained as chaotic and hand-to-mouth as it had looked the first day. And then a new factor entered into the situation—well, not new, but one that Alfred hadn't counted on—politics—a sharp bitter fight between the administration (that's the mayor and his appointees, chief of police, corporation counsel, and so on) and the board of aldermen.

The mayor of Chicago has a lot of power, and he can exercise it, up to a certain point, quite irresponsibly. But if he is overtaken by illusions of grandeur and neglects to conciliate at least an ef-

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fective minority of the aldermanic body, that body can make him wish he had never been born.

Well, this contract that Alfred was concerned with had been one of the most attractive displays in the mayor's pre-election show-window—a sentimental, half-practical, half-baked project for a municipal market which should loosen the rapacious clutch of the commission man upon the throat of the ultimate consumer. And it is quite consistent with our American impatience of thorough study and expert advice, and our eagerness to do material things—to do something, it doesn't matter much what—that this great project should have boiled down, almost at once, to the letting of a contract for the first unit of a vast acreage of buildings; in short, to a fat job for some loyal liegeman of the mayor.

And you will see, I think, how naturally it came about that when the desire arose to make the mayor uncomfortable, this job should have been picked out as the target. It was so picked out, and a committee of perspicacious and able-minded reformers

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(the use of the word reformer is not necessarily derogatory) was appointed to investigate.

The mere announcement of the appointment of this committee, before ever it fired a shot, brought the contractor down to his office in a foaming rage.

The grafting politician, in stories and on the stage, is presented as formidable, wielding vast unquestioned powers; giving orders (with a cigar in his mouth) to respectful subordinates who rush to do his bidding; anything from murder down. He is inhumanly adroit as well as grim. Already he has made his millions, and he is on his way to make millions more. He frequently gets "crushed," to be sure, in the last act or the last chapter, but never until he has had a long and, some might think, compensatory run for his money.

But the real grafter, I venture to say, seldom enjoys an experience like that, even before he is forced to his knees by the superior adroitness of the young hero. For your real grafter is always grafted upon. Let me attempt a definition that will make this clear. Graft is a cash valuation upon

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gratitude. The man who has just cashed in on somebody's gratitude to him, Alfred's contractor for example, with his fat job from the mayor, must in turn honor drafts upon his own gratitude. If he were to let these drafts go to protest, try to get his own work done on a basis of ruthless efficiency, the vengeance upon him would be instantaneous and terrible. So he's the worst-served man in the world.

A man of first-class ability, to be sure, might compromise his way out of the difficulty—feed his flock of lame ducks sufficiently with jobs where they couldn't do much harm, and still pay competent people to do the real work. But the grafter never is a man of first-rate ability. If he isn't stupid, he isn't a grafter, since the rewards of playing the game within the rules are, to the man of exceptional ability, immensely greater than any conceivable reward for the grafter.

So if the case of this particular grafter had been sorrowful before, it was really desperate after the appointment of that subcommittee.

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Alfred witnessed the tragedy—not completely, as one sees a performance in the theater from the fourth row, but in vivid intimate glimpses as one sees it from the wings—outbursts and explosions that came through the glass door of the private office, asides which he was supposed, ludicrously, not to understand when he'd been summoned into the presence for instructions as to this, or explanations as to that. The contractor had flown to the mayor, it seemed, and had got small comfort from him, His Honor having evidently made it clear that he had troubles enough of his own. The engineer talked of resigning.

Finally there came a morning when Alfred Blair turned, with a shrug, from a sheet of figures he had been poring over, stretched his arms, grinned, got up and walked, unsummoned, into the private office. The contractor rasped out a "What do you want?" and resumed, gloomily, the contemplation of a sheet of figures of his own. There was still the suggestion of a smile on Alfred's face.

"I came in to suggest," he said, "that you come

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to lunch with me to-day at one o'clock at the Union League Club. I have a proposition to make to you."

The contractor started, stared, made a passionate prediction as to his state in a future world, and demanded to be told what his subordinate meant. His amazement was driven home a little deeper by a realization he couldn't have explained, that the man who stood there the other side of the desk was a subordinate no longer.

Exteriorly he looked just the same, was in his shirt-sleeves, his waistcoat unbuttoned, his hands in his trousers pockets; but his air was, inexplicably, one of authority.

"I mean just that," he said. "I have a proposition to make to you. Lunch is a good time to talk. The club's just across the street."

"Are you a member of that club?" asked the contractor.

Alfred nodded. "If you object to it," he said, "we can go anywhere else."

It was, we may observe in parenthesis, a matter

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of pure luck that Alfred had not resigned from that club. He'd paid his dues for the year not more than a fortnight before the crash. He hadn't considered it luck at the time; but there he was mistaken. The effect of Alfred's announcement on the contractor, was cheap at a hundred dollars. It made a perfect dramatic preparation for the thing Alfred was going to suggest. The suggestion was the sort that wanted preparing, too.

The contractor said he didn't object to the club.

"You'll come then," said Alfred, not inflecting it like a question.

The contractor said, yes, he'd come, but wanted explanations. What was the idea?

"I'll wait till lunch to explain, if you don't mind," Alfred told him coolly, and went back to his desk.

These tactics, adroit as they were, were not pre-calculated at all. They were just a symptom that Alfred's mind was once more fully on the job. His employer's curiosity, if unsatisfied, would be working for him steadily till lunch-time. And the sort

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of lunch he would give him—the atmosphere with which the club would surround the lunch—would work for him, too.

He gave all these influences time to do their work—plenty of time. Then, after the lighting with one match of two admirable cigars, he made a falcon swoop straight to the heart of the business.

“My proposition is,” he said, without preface or explanation, “that I guarantee you a profit of twenty thousand dollars on this contract in consideration of a half-interest in whatever the profits turn out to be; also in consideration of your putting complete authority over everything concerned in the contract into my hands.”

Alfred was himself again, no mistake. There was the old touch about these tactics. The obvious method of going about the business would have been to begin by dwelling upon the contractor's plight—the gristly prospect ahead of him if things went on as they were going now, an opening which would have given the contractor something to argue about.

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Alfred's omission to say a word about this staring fact only made its stare the more sinister.

"Your guarantee would be worth a hell of a lot, wouldn't it?" said the contractor, with the best imitation he could manage of jovial scorn.

"Of course," said Alfred, "the only guarantee that would be of any value would be the cash itself put up with a bank pending the completion of the contract."

"Look here!" demanded the contractor. "Who in blazes are you, anyway?"

"You ought to know," Alfred said. He didn't answer further, and when the contractor asked, "Are you A. C. Blair?" he merely nodded.

The contractor blew up at this point and spoke at length and at large, the upshot of his harangue being a demand to know his competitor's motive in spying around his office.

"Not spying," Alfred said quietly. "You'll see that for yourself in a minute. If I'd been a spy, instead of coming to you now, I'd be going around

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to the council's subcommittee and getting a job as their expert. I am an expert. I know that line of work as well as anybody in the United States. But I haven't done that. I've come to you and offered you an absolutely fair proposition."

"What did you come for, then?" persisted the contractor. "Did you have a tip that those fool aldermen were going to butt in?"

Blair hesitated for a second, then told the simple truth.

"No," he said. "I needed a job and I answered a blind ad. in *The News*."

"Down and out, eh?" commented the contractor. He didn't believe a word of Alfred's story. Then, with a pounce, "Where did you get this twenty thousand dollars?"

"I haven't it," said Alfred. "If you take up my proposition, I'll have to go and borrow it somewhere."

The contractor stared blankly across the table. "Say!" he demanded roughly. "What's the idea, bringing me here and kidding me along with a pipe



“What’s the idea bringing me here and kidding me?”

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like that, when you haven't got a cent? What do you think it'll get you?"

"You don't need to worry about that," Alfred said. "You aren't out anything for listening, even if it is a pipe. All you have to do is make up your mind whether you will accept it or not, in case I can come across. That's the next step—yes or no from you. If it's yes, I'll try to borrow the money. But I've got to have a proposition to borrow it on."

"You've got no more chance to get that money—" the contractor murmured, and then let the sentence slump away while he gazed moodily at the table-cloth and the pattern he was drawing on it with his thumb-nail. "What will you do," he asked at last, "if I tell you there's nothing doing?"

"I don't know," said Alfred. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

It would have been almost a relief to the contractor if Alfred had threatened him with going to the subcommittee and getting appointed as their expert. That would have given him something to get fighting mad about, and his temper craved a

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fight. The threat was there all right, though it wasn't expressed.

Alfred drew a folded paper from his pocket and handed it across, without comment, to the contractor. It was a memorandum of the bargain he had proposed, stated almost as simply as he had stated it a few moments before. There was one more paragraph in it, stating that the agreement was of no effect unless Blair put up the money within forty-eight hours of their signing it.

The contractor pondered it a while longer without speaking. At last:

"Oh, it's all damned foolishness," he said. "You'll never get the money."

"Don't count on that," said Alfred, "or you're likely to get fooled. Here, do you want a pen?"

Fifteen minutes later, with the signed memorandum in his pocket, he walked into his bank and sat down in the president's office. An hour later, he walked out again with the money.

He was not in the least surprised that it had come out this way. The opportunity was so lumi-

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nously clear to him, and his confidence in his own ability to make the most of it so clearly based on expert knowledge and tried ability, that he could hardly have failed to get the help he needed. It was just a question of making everything transparently clear.

His personal credit, it should be pointed out, was excellent. The way he'd poured his own money into the cleaning up of the Waters-Macdonald mess, was a thing no banker would be likely to forget.

He went straight back to the office and spent the rest of the afternoon nailing down all four corners of his agreement with the contractor. He meant to leave no unstopped rat-holes in that document. For heaven knew there were rats enough!

The contractor lost his temper a good many times, climbed up on his dignity, appealed to the high gods. His new partner was trying to convert him into a mere figurehead.

"Exactly," said Alfred coolly. "That's the essence of this bargain. My authority's not to be questioned, and everything else is. I'll do all the

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hiring and all the firing. Then those specifications! They're crooked from beginning to end. I'll go to the council and get them straightened out. If any of your friends come to you and squeal, send them to me. But what I'd do, if I were you, would be to take my wife and go to the seashore—anywhere, and not come back till the job's done."

The contractor writhed and struggled—would have got away if he could. But the numerals on that check kept him fascinated.

At five o'clock it was all over. Even as he had eaten the foreman a week or so ago, Alfred Blair had now eaten the contractor.

And it was not until this deed was fully accomplished—until he had put on his hat and coat and stood ready to walk out of the office, that the thought of Celia came into his mind at all, or of what the new situation was going to mean to them.

Of course it wouldn't be accurate to say that he'd acted this morning, and subsequently, without any premeditation at all. He had meditated. He had, more or less, figured the whole thing out, but as a

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fanciful project purely—as something he wasn't going to do. His imagination had to be at something, and it had constructed, he looking on with indulgent amusement all the time, this project; had developed it indeed, down to some of its quite small details—but always, as I said, fancifully. What led him to get up that morning and walk into the contractor's office and begin to carry the thing out, was impulse, motivated not by any wish to provide an ampler life for Celia or to rehabilitate himself; springing rather from a pure impatience to get the job done. The muffing and fumbling that had gone under his eyes, had irritated him to the point where he couldn't stand it any longer. So he got up and took on the job himself. That was all there was to it.

It wasn't all there was to it, though. He realized this the first time he thought about Celia. She couldn't be expected—it wouldn't be human to expect that she'd want to go on living as they were, now that he was getting a salary of a hundred dollars a week (this was what he and the contractor

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had agreed upon) and a half share in the profits besides.

Of course there mightn't be any profits—at least not for Alfred. To the eye of cold reason, that possibility would appear to be worth taking seriously. He didn't take it very seriously, to be sure, but then he knew his eye wasn't coldly reasonable. He knew he was going to succeed. Still, one never lost any chickens by refraining from counting them till they were hatched. And from Celia's point of view, mightn't it, perhaps, be a kindness not to tease her with hopes which she could see plainly enough might turn out groundless? Wouldn't she be happier if he waited till the job was done and paid for, and then presented her with the results, in, as it were, a package? To balance that evening when he told her of his failure?

But, contemplated, this scene didn't afford him any whole-souled satisfaction. He couldn't see Celia rushing delightedly into his arms at the end of the recital. The heroines of the screen would, all right—but Celia—

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Then there was another angle on the thing. She'd been a perfectly corking sport about the whole business—ever since that night when he'd told her of the smash. There hadn't been a whimper—a reproach. But that was because of her unquestioning belief that the come-down was necessary. And wouldn't that belief be shaken, if he were to go to her now and tell her that he'd borrowed twenty thousand dollars, and made himself a partner in the enterprise? If he could get twenty thousand dollars as easily as that—just by going and asking for it, why hadn't he done it three months ago? He'd had just a touch of that feeling himself as he came away from the bank. The whole effect of the day's doings upon him, was to make that routine work of his over a drafting-board, at twenty-two fifty a week seem a little unreal—like playing a part. Wouldn't she feel that even more strongly—feel that she'd been sacrificed, not to necessity, but to a mere vagary of his own temperament? Perhaps if he waited a while before he told her—not until the job was finished, of course, but

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for—say another couple of months, and then perhaps broke it gradually, promoted himself by easy stages—

He didn't like that notion any too well, either. Anyhow, the thing wanted thinking over. He could take time for that—a few days—what would they matter one way or another?—to come to the right conclusion. Of course he'd tell her. It would be outrageously unfair to try to keep her in the dark. The only question was just how he'd do it, and when.

There is an insidious and diabolical subtlety about the sin of procrastination, which lies in the fact that while its effects go on remorselessly piling up, the sin itself diminishes in geometrical progression. The difference between making a confession on the eighth day, instead of on the seventh, is very much less than the difference between making it on the second instead of on the first; while the difference between making it on the thirty-first or on the thirtieth is almost negligible:

This was what made it possible to go on not tell-

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ing Celia of the change in his fortunes. It would be an outrage to deceive her; he admitted that. She had earned, if any human being ever could earn, his completest confidence. Well, and didn't he mean to give it to her? Of course he did. Only—not to-night. To-morrow, perhaps—or Sunday, when there'd be time for a good long talk about it. But Sunday they'd devoted to a picnic up the shore. Why spoil a perfect thing like that with a lot of worries about the future? Celia was happy, wasn't she, with things as they were? Obviously happier, healthier, altogether more alive than she'd ever been before in her life.

So he went along, except for an occasional twinge, rather easily, until the night when his incautious reference to little Major March, and his equally incautious neglect to bring home a pay-envelope, brought him up standing against a fact and on the threshold of a surmise. The fact was that his pretended willingness to tell Celia, his pretended intention to tell her when the occasion should arise, was completely false. She'd given him the occasion,

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and instead of taking it, he had, in a panic, deliberately lied to her—made up a hasty excuse about having had his salary raised, so obviously flimsy and extemporaneous, that it was a wonder she hadn't seen through it.

And the surmise was that Celia was not so happy—not, at least, so contented with their present way of living—as he'd supposed. The way her mind had played with the possibility that the inventor might make their fortune after all—as if, for some reason, a fortune were a desirable thing—had kept him awake for hours that night. And when at last, discovering that she was awake too, he had nerved himself to ask her, point-blank, if she was getting tired of the way they lived—of the hardships and deprivations of it all, and she had told him eagerly that she was not—she had begun to say something that would qualify her answer, and then stopped. “Only—” It had taken all his resolution to ask her to go on. “Only what?” And she'd said, “Nothing—yet.”

Yet. There was an immense lot to think about behind that one small word.

CHAPTER X

INTERVENTION

BARRING one bad moment just after she entered the store, when the floor-walker came up and asked, rather mechanically, what he could do for her, Celia found no difficulty in carrying out the first item of her program—namely, the sale of her jewels.

Old Colonel Forsythe, the senior partner of the firm, had known her father for years, and her since she was a little girl, and from the moment she was shown into his office, everything was easy for her. He had, probably, a bad moment of his own after she'd told him her errand, which she did complete, in one sentence, as she held out her parcel to him.

"I want to sell these things for two thousand dollars," she said. She added, over the look of acute unhappiness she saw come into his face, "I mean I hope they're worth that much."

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He explained, while he was cutting the string and opening the package, why it was that the amount things had cost was not a trustworthy guide to what they might be worth when one wanted to sell them. "We can't sell second-hand jewelry, you know, and all we can pay for is the unset stones and the bullion value of the setting."

His face cleared instantly, though, when he saw the contents of her treasure-box. Alfred's taste, luckily, had been primitive. It hadn't run to encrusted butterflies and things like that—had confined itself to what a gambler or a professional baseball-player would speak of as rocks.

"These things are worth considerably more than two thousand dollars," said the jeweler.

"Oh, that's nice," said Celia comfortably. "But it's just two thousand that I want. So if you'll pick out what comes to that, I'll take the rest back."

The thing could be done on that basis, but not, it seemed, so instantaneously as Celia had supposed. To his offer to mail her a check during the day, and send the residuum back to her by special messenger,

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she demurred. She'd like to wait for the money, if she might, and take it away in cash.

To her surprise, he hesitated over this request, frowned, drummed his fingers on the desk—seemed on the point of making some sort of protest, and then instead, said something that struck her, for a moment, as utterly irrelevant, about the wild uncertainties of the stock-market.

The course she and Alfred had been taking in the movies during the past three months, supplied her suddenly with an explanation, and she laughed.

"Oh, I'm not going to speculate with it," she told him, and his face cleared at once.

"If only you knew how many of them do that behind their husbands' backs—women who ought to know better—and put me in a position of having to choose between being an officious meddler, and a *particeps criminis*—"

"Do they, really?" said Celia, properly scandalized. "But how silly of them! They always lose, don't they?" The movies, as I say, had made this perfectly clear to her.

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She was quite honest about this. The word speculation had a definite meaning to her. It consisted in taking your money to a room with a ticker in it, giving it to a man, who immediately rushed out to the floor of the Stock Exchange with it, and made wild gestures, while his victim stayed by the ticker and watched the tape: at first with exultation—because you always won at first—and later with despair. Because, inevitably, you lost in the end. That the word speculation could be applied to the act she contemplated; namely, giving her money—all her money, practically—to an inventor, for the purpose of financing the tests of his invention, didn't occur to her.

His doubts removed by the unquestionable candor of Celia's attitude, Colonel Forsythe promptly thought of a way to avoid keeping her waiting.

"I can give you two thousand dollars now," he said, "and then, when these things are precisely valued, which involves examining and weighing them very closely, you can come in and select, to keep,

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whatever will leave us the two thousand dollars' worth we have bought." He also persuaded her to take a check instead of the twenty hundred-dollar bills she wanted. She hadn't thought of pick-pockets.

Major March's address—ascertained from the telephone-book, down in the lower twenties somewhere, just off Wabash Avenue, involving a ride in a crowded street-car—made the colonel's suggestion seem worth taking.

A momentary fright she had on the way down would have been a good deal more serious if she had had those twenty hundred-dollar bills in her wrist-bag. The adventure began just a block after she had taken the street-car, when a man got on and sat down beside her. The car wasn't empty enough to make this action of his really marked. He'd have had to sit down beside somebody. Still there were plenty of other places where he might have sat, and he had chosen her seat rather abruptly—plumped down in it without that customary moment

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of hesitation to give her a chance to move over a little, and quite involuntarily she glanced around at him.

The glance reassured her. He seemed completely preoccupied—unaware of her as anything but a lump that took up so much space in the seat. He had a big manila envelope in his hands, which were pale and nervously precise in their movements. The moment he was settled in his seat, he put on a pair of tortoise-shell spectacles, undid the patent fastener of the envelope, and drew out a quantity of typewritten sheets, whose pristine freshness proclaimed that they were just out of the machine—a manuscript, evidently, that he was just fetching away from the typist who'd copied it for him. An author, probably. That would account for the vague oddity there was about everything he did. His sheets were spread out so candidly under her eye, that she had definitely to turn away and look out the window, in order to avoid reading them.

Just before they reached the street where she was to get off, she pressed the motorman's signal and

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stood up. The action seemed to startle her companion rather unnecessarily, for he snatched off his spectacles, crammed his pages together anyhow, and himself rose to let her go by.

She said: "Oh, I'm sorry!" and "Thank you," in a tone which her faint amusement over him made a little less mechanically impersonal than the one she'd ordinarily have used.

Even so, one would hardly have thought he heard anything more than common civility in it, and she was a good deal surprised when, obviously without premeditation, he followed her down the aisle and got off the car just behind her. It was still more disconcerting when she'd crossed the street and turned east, to observe that he was coming along that way, too.

She was not really alarmed about him, of course, and but for the forlornness of the neighborhood, with its negro tenements, boarded-up residences, and rusty little stores with windows long unwashed, she'd hardly have given him two thoughts. As it was, when she saw the number she wanted, painted

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dimly on a transom, she had an impulse to keep right on going as briskly as possible to the nearest car line. She conquered it, of course, and went up the three rickety steps to the door above which the number was painted. It was an unkempt little wooden building one story high, that had once been a retail shop. But its show-window—not plate glass but common panes—had been painted white, as also the light in the door had been, to baffle the curiosity of the passer-by.

She tried the door and found it locked; knocked smartly on it, and got no answer, and was turning away, baffled, when she saw that her pursuer from the street-car had halted at the foot of the steps and seemed, indecisively, to be waiting for her to come down. That was when she got her momentary fright.

She turned back to the door and rattled it. Whereupon the young man came up the steps. At that she rounded upon him.

“What do you want?” she demanded fiercely.

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"I wanted to get in," he said, and then she saw he had a key in his hand.

She stared at him a second, then understood. The explanation was so simple that nothing but the extraordinary nature of the coincidence had kept her from seeing it sooner. In his absorption over his papers, he'd have ridden by his corner, if her getting up hadn't aroused him. She said:

"Oh, then you're Major March?" Then she realized that she'd called this total stranger by his first name. To cover this slip, she hurried on: "I'm Celia Blair—Alfred Blair's wife." And, in the next breath, before he'd at all got his, she added, "I've come to bring you that two thousand dollars."

At that he stared back at her. The look in his eyes wasn't far from panic. Vaguely he put his key back in his pocket, crumpled his carefully cherished envelope in both hands, turned very white, beaded out all over his forehead with sweat, and sat down limply on the top step.

She rescued his envelope and said: "If you'll

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give me your key, I'll go in and get you a drink of water."

He said, "Just a minute," and before the expiration of that time, got to his feet again, unlocked the door, and with a ceremony pathetically out of place in the circumstances, ushered her in ahead of him.

The little shop was pretty well filled up with bulky objects which she classified loosely as machinery, but there were two chairs—one with a cushion in it, in front of an old black walnut table. In order to get him to sit down she promptly took the other one.

"This is made out to me," she said, taking the check from her wrist-bag, "so I'll have to endorse it." She reached over and helped herself to a pen. "Shall I say, 'Pay to the order of Major March?'"

"Yes," he said blankly, "that's all right."

When she pushed it over to him, he picked it up, but almost instantly laid it down again and drew a trembling hand across his forehead. Then, with an astonishing intensity, his eyes fairly burning into her, he demanded, "There's nothing funny



"This is no joke? That's a good check? I can get the money?"

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about this, is there? This is no joke? That's a good check? I can get the money?"

"Joke!" she gasped. Then, very simply, "It's a good check. They're the biggest firm of jewelers in the city. It's quite all right."

He offered no apology for his questions; just sat there drawing in one long breath after another. After a moment he pulled the papers out of the envelope he'd brought in with him, and once more, unconsciously, began crumpling them.

"Oh, please don't do that!" Celia cried, and would have rescued them from him. But he chucked them bodily into a waste-paper basket.

"They're no good now," he said. "That check's the answer to them. It was a fool appeal I was going to send out—hopeless, I knew, all the while."

Then he got up and said, "I suppose you'd like to see about the place a little," and taking her assent for granted, began to point things out to her—a hydrogen generator, an electrical furnace—other things whose names were too unfamiliar to stick in her mind.

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But suddenly he stopped in full career, and said, as if it were what he had been talking about all the while, "You see, when a man really doubts himself, that's about the end of him. That's why my talk with Alfred Blair Saturday just about finished me. He's not one of these ordinary rich numskulls. He's a man of imagination—a big man. And he believed in me once. He was the only person who did. It's been, as much as anything else, the feeling that I've got to justify that belief that's kept me going. I have kept going, and I've got the things right that were wrong before.

"But he didn't believe that when I told him so the other day. He was kind—he'd always be that—and encouraging. But it was quite plain that I'd become to him just one of those freak fool inventors that they make jokes about in the comic supplements—somebody to be sorry for and lend fifty dollars to and get rid of.

"Well, it's pretty hard to believe a man is wrong when you see him surrounded with the evidence of his rightness about other things—see him making

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decisions, crisp and cool, and other people taking them without a moment's question. So I came away wondering if he wasn't right about me. That's why I went to pieces like that when you came and told me he'd changed his mind."

"But you didn't understand!" said Celia. "He didn't disbelieve in you. He told me that night that he thought probably you were right about it. But we're poor. Didn't he tell you that? We lost all our money. We're living in a little twelve-dollar-a-month flat out near Humboldt Park. He's working for twenty-five dollars a week—oh, but thirty! He got a raise Saturday. So you see, it wasn't that he didn't believe in you."

It had been a certain tense incredulity in his gaze at her, which had kept her piling up these confirmatory details—a vaguely disquieting look. She was glad when he turned away.

"But then, the two thousand dollars?" he asked suddenly, turning back again after a silence. "Where did that come from?"

"Oh, that," she said, "was something that he in-

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sisted was mine and wouldn't touch. It was mine, in a way, of course. So when he said he thought you were right about it, I went and got the money, without telling him, you see, and brought it to you. And I don't want you to tell him, either. Just write him a note that you've got the money for the test, and that you'll let him know how it comes out."

"Sit down for another minute," he said, and led the way back to the black walnut table, where the check lay, just as she'd pushed it over to him. "I think I ought to tell you," he went on, "that any sensible man of business experience, if he knew about this transaction, would warn you very earnestly, not to go through with it. He'd beg you to pick up that check, if he were standing here, and put it back in your pocket. If he did, I shouldn't have a word to say, except to thank you for your kindness. That's what I'll do if you pick it up and put it back in your purse now. I don't urge you to do it myself, because I absolutely believe that it's a safe, immensely profitable investment. But I'm

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the only person in the world who believes that. Don't you want to take it back?"

"No," said Celia. "I believe it, too."

He picked up the check, folded it very deliberately, and put it in his pocketbook. Visibly he was thinking his way through the silence to something else. At last he said, "I'll do as you like about your husband, of course—tell him simply that I've got the money to complete the tests; also, I'll tell him when they're successful. But, since you're a partner in this business, I'd like to notify you, too. Do you mind letting me have your address?"

"Why," said Celia, "why—of course not. I—we'd be glad if you'd come and see us. And—and of course you may let me know as well as Alfred, if you like."

He took the card she wrote for him and put it, too, in his pocketbook, with an air, somehow, of concluding the business between them as he did so.

She got up and held out her hand to him. "Good-by," she said, "and good luck! And I hope you'll come out and see us."

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She hadn't the least idea that he would. She gave him the invitation in an uneasy attempt to obliterate the reason he had avowed for asking for her address. So that he could notify her as well as her husband of the success of his tests! Oh, it was natural enough that he should want to do that—especially considering how queer he was—a sort of sentimental recognition of her as a partner in the enterprise. If he'd just said something like that—

It was his silence—his failure to make that obvious little explanation, that made it seem queer. But even his queerness could hardly go to the length of a fear that her husband wouldn't tell her if the thing succeeded.

He did run away with strange notions, though. His account of his scene with Alfred was so widely at variance with her husband's report of the casual encounter that had taken place between them.

What had he meant by saying he had seen Alfred with all the evidences of his rightness about other things around him; making decisions that other people accepted? It must have been a most casual

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encounter, really. Hadn't Alfred said it took place in the street? The inventor might have walked along with him back to the office, of course.

She stopped short on the way over to the street-car, from a sudden impulse to go back and ask the inventor one question. Had Alfred offered him fifty dollars? March hadn't said so in so many words. Alfred had treated him, he said, as the kind of inventor one offers fifty dollars to in order to get rid of. Of course it was an absurd idea. Alfred hadn't fifty dollars. She knew—didn't she?—almost exactly, within a couple of dollars, how much he had on the last day before pay-day.

All the same, it was a minute or two that she stood there fighting off that impulse to go back. And the real reason down underneath, why she did not go, was that she was afraid to.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE DARK

THERE is a widely held idea that we arrive at our convictions by piecing them together, matching up bits that fit, the way we solve picture puzzles. But in reality, convictions are live things, and they grow. Sometimes they're plants we get from the gardener and set out in a carefully selected spot, with an artificially enriched soil about their roots; sometimes they are weeds whose seeding is a mystery to us and whose rank growth is our despair. That is how a hateful conviction about her husband began to grow in Celia's mind.

She could not have told, when first she saw it sprouting up, exactly what it was going to turn out to be. It was just a vague wonder, at first—something not to think about. Something shaped like an interrogation point, which she had resolutely to ignore whenever she tried to tell herself, as she did

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more often every day, that she was completely in her husband's confidence, and he in hers.

The thing had planted itself and begun to grow, although she didn't know it, at some time before her talk with March..

This was evident from the fact that the inventor's hints had found something in her that answered them—met them half-way. If the thing had not already seeded and sprouted in her, the notion would not have occurred to her, even though labeled preposterous, that Alfred might have offered Major March fifty dollars.

And now that she looked at it, she saw another stalk growing beside it—the question whether Alfred's boss had really raised his wages last Saturday, to thirty dollars a week, and if so, why he had forgotten to tell her. Forgotten! And come home on a Saturday night without his week's pay in his pocket! And looked so blank when she'd asked him for it!

She scolded herself furiously—was indeed, sincerely angry with herself—despised herself rather.

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It was her miserable feminine pettiness and suspicion and jealousy that were responsible. Women were like that, she supposed, and they'd just have to get over it, before the equality they were so fond of proclaiming nowadays would have any basis in fact. Love in them didn't breed a fine confidence in the object of it. It made them willing—eager, to impute the low-downest, meanest evasions and tricks. She remembered, years ago, having heard a boy say about a girl he'd quarreled with, that she was no gentleman. Did she want to give Alfred the right to say the same thing about her?

A thorough dressing-down like that did her good. The first time she resorted to it, indeed, she thought it had effected a cure. This was on the afternoon of that very Monday when she took the two thousand dollars to Major March. She waited for her husband to come home that night, with nothing in her heart but a pure longing to make up to him in love and confidence, for the injurious misgivings she'd harbored against him.

But, just the same, when he, before she'd taken

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her arms away from around his neck, pulled out of his pocket a sealed envelope—a regular pay-envelope—and tore it open and produced three ten-dollar bills, she sensed something a little unnatural about it all. If he'd gone to the cashier to get the money instead of the check as he'd promised, would the cashier have taken the trouble to put the money in an envelope? The pettiness of the doubt infuriated her, and she retorted on herself with a counter-attack. Wouldn't she have been just as suspicious, unworthy little fool that she was, if he'd taken three loose bills out of his pocket? Have wondered why they weren't in an envelope?

She waited, breathlessly one might almost have said, to see whether he'd tell her that he'd heard from March; assuring herself pretty often that of course he would, and finding herself believing, in between, that he wouldn't. She tried, off and on, to convince herself that there was no reason why he should. But this ground was untenable.

He did tell her on Tuesday night—the very day he'd heard. But not until quite late, after they'd

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gone to bed. It hadn't been a very jolly evening. There was an uncomfortable silent stretch after supper, which he'd broken up by suggesting the movies. They'd gone, and they hadn't been much amused. He had been as bored as she, she was sure. But it was he who had asked her what the matter was—why she hadn't liked it.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "they're all so exactly alike, those people on the screen. They lie so much and believe each other so easily! Somebody says something that isn't so at all, but no matter how unlikely it is, the other person acts as if there weren't any possibility of doubting it; goes on and believes it for years. I don't believe that people really can lie very much, or deceive each other very long, there are so many little ways of giving themselves away. That wife to-night, if she hadn't been born an idiot, would have known."

Alfred had had nothing to contribute to this conversation at all, and they'd walked along home, locked up, undressed and gone to bed in an almost unbroken silence. It was then he said:

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"Oh, by the way! I heard from March. He got his money."

"His two thousand dollars?" It was curiously easy for her to manage that tone of cool indifference. She despised herself, rather, for being able to act so well. "I suppose," she went on, "that the person who gave it to him must look pretty foolish to you."

"Oh, no," he said comfortably, "not necessarily. No, not a bit. There's a chance that he's made a perfectly corking investment. He probably got his pound of flesh for it, all right."

It occurred to Celia at this moment, that she'd made no bargain, expressed or implied, with the inventor; had simply given him the money. She didn't believe that he had noticed the omission either.

This speculation of hers occupied a rather long silence. Finally Alfred went on, jocularly—a little too jocularly, her ear told her.

"So you see, we may make our everlasting fortunes after all. I've got an iron-clad contract with

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him—not that March would try to evade any sort of contract, or even an obligation—that gives me half of whatever his invention brings in, cash, royalties, or stock. Old lady, we may get to be millionaires yet.”

The only appropriate response Celia could think of to this remark was a laugh of good-humored skepticism, and as she did not dare attempt this (feeling pretty sure it wouldn't sound as she meant it to) she lay still and waited.

After another silence, he asked, “Do you wish we were?”

“Millionaires? With a butler and a box at the opera and six motors?”

“Oh,” he said, “I didn't mean anything fantastic. I meant, were you wishing it might run to enough to—put us back where we were—your old friends, the old way of living? Shall you be looking forward to it as something that would pull us out of this? That's what I mean. Are you getting sick of this?”

The words gave Celia a chance to tell him what

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she really did want. She'd hesitated to tell him before, you will remember, that dream of hers about the two or three acres somewhere, from a reluctance to cut short his holiday. Well, whatever had come to take its place, his holiday was over—had been, now she came to think of it, for weeks. And this bubble of hope which Major March's invention had sent swimming before their eyes, was, no matter how illusory it might prove to be, a thing one could use for seeing all sorts of fanciful, roseate reflections in. Well, why couldn't she say to him:

“Darlingest, I wouldn't go back to that old way of living for a million dollars, or a hundred million, and you know it just as well as I do. It was a nightmare to you when we lived like that, and it wasn't to me. But it's grown to be a nightmare to me now since I've learned what really being alive means. But I do want to get away from here to somewhere where live growing things—young live things—will have a better chance; more air and sun and cleanness than they'd have here. I don't want anything big—not too big for me to run myself

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while you're in town—but room enough for flowers and vegetables, and chickens, and a cow. And a baby, Fred."

If she could have said that she'd have saved herself some bitterly unhappy weeks; could have said it aloud, that is. She did say it to herself almost word for word as I have reported it. But she couldn't say it to Alfred. And why? Well, she knew why. Because she believed he wasn't telling his true dreams and hopes to her.

What she did say, with the kind of yawn one makes when he finds his teeth inclined to chatter, was:

"Oh, what's the use, Fred? You asked me that just the other night. } You don't need to worry about me. It won't do any good in the first place, and there's no need of it, in the second. Of course, if this summer keeps on very hot, it won't be easy. This place gets like an oven about three in the afternoon, but I can go out in the park where it's as cool as anywhere. You're the one to worry about

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really. You've looked awfully tired and pulled down the last week or two. Is it dreadfully hot in your office?"

He said, rather gruffly, that he was all right, and she waited a good long while, lying very still, to see if he'd say any more. But he didn't.

Well, then, the thing Celia had regarded, when she first saw its sprouts appear, as a noxious weed of suspicion, grew straight and tall and hard in fiber, until it was a great tree—a veritable oak of conviction. The conviction was that her husband, by means unknown, had recovered his former prosperity, or at least a good part of it; and that his reason for concealing the fact from her was a failure to trust her—a fear that, given the chance, she would go straight back to the hard, artificial, pretentious life he had hated so.

The conviction was fed and watered by nothing tangible enough to be called evidence. Indeed, when bits of evidence or opportunity to collect bits of evidence came her way she deliberately shut her

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eyes to them. The fact of prosperity was legibly stamped on him, that was all; the way he said things, his tricks of speech, the color of his ideas.

If she had been fanatically logical, as many women are, the life would have been impossible to her. Because the logical implication of his fear was that he had never believed in her—didn't believe in the new Celia at all; regarded her merely as the old one in masquerade, waiting only for the chance to turn back to her true colors. All her guarantees of good faith, the finding and furnishing of the flat, the joyous acceptance of his poverty, the passionate renunciation of her old self, had availed nothing.

She did ride out to that logical terminus sometimes when she was alone, but the sound of his step on the stairs always brought her back to two quite simple facts: that she was in love with him and that he was in love with her. No asbestos fabric of mere ideas could withstand the white heat which

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those two facts together generated. So, though she was indignant — tormented — humiliated, she was able, in some mysterious way, to snatch some hours out of the twenty-four of pure happiness with him.

She punished him in various small ways; rubbed the drudgery of her domestic routine into him in subtle ways that concealed the intent behind them. For example, one hot night when he came home he found she hadn't cooked any supper.

"The stove before and the dish water after," she said, "was too much." If he didn't mind, they'd go round to Larry Doyle's and get something. "Out to a restaurant for dinner!" she mocked. "What shall we have? Let's see. Sweet-breads, *sous cloche*, and hearts of lettuce with Thousand Island dressing, and a peach *Melba*. Doesn't that sound good?"

He winced at that, then said: "All right. Come along. We'll go to the Blackstone instead of to Larry's, and we'll have exactly that."

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"The Blackstone!" she flashed at him. "Do you think I'd be seen there in any of the clothes I've got?"

Then, over the acute misery in his face, she repented. She hadn't meant it. She'd been edgy all day, waiting for somebody to dig her claws into, and it happened to be he.

She'd love to go to the Blackstone. She thought a lark that they flagrantly couldn't afford was exactly what they both needed. As for clothes, of course hers were all right.

So they went and had a thoroughly good time. And when Alfred paid the bill Celia pretended to be looking another way. The entertainment cut no figure in their weekly accounts, and where the money it cost had come from was neither asked nor explained. Celia went on keeping accounts, it may be said, but she no longer balanced them.

The thing that made it possible, of course, to go on like this from day to day was that a crisis was clearly coming. When Major March had completed his tests, and driven his bargain, and in-

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formed her of the result of it, something would have to happen. If the tests were successful, and the bargain a good one, and Alfred didn't tell her then—!

CHAPTER XII

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

JUST six weeks after Celia took her two thousand dollars to Major March—six weeks and one day, to be precise, bringing it upon a Tuesday, along about eleven o'clock in the morning, right in the midst of her week's ironing—she got the letter he had promised her.

Her husband's manner for the past three or four days had led her to believe it was about due. It had been enigmatic—portentous of something—anyhow, a manner of visibly suppressed excitement, during the brief periods when she had seen him awake. He had been staying down-town evenings, and even on Sunday he had gone off about nine o'clock, to clean up some extra work, he'd said.

She tore open the envelope in a tangle of contradictory emotions, feeling that good news would have so much bad in it, and bad news so much good, that

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she hardly knew what to hope for. It contained news at all events.

"I haven't a doubt," March wrote (evidently he could lie better on paper than *viva voce*), "that my tidings, as tidings, are superfluous. But as congratulations, you will accept them. The thing has come out beyond my hopes. Not the tests, which your faith made possible. They showed precisely what I knew they would. But the bargain we were able to drive on the strength of them.

"That was all your husband's doing, of course. The eagles would have made a meal of me and left little but bones. But in Blair's office, seated about his broad mahogany board, where we have been rooted for the past four days, with important people clamoring for audience with him on other affairs, it has been easy to feign an Olympian indifference as to whether our capitalists accepted our terms or left the opportunity to other and wiser men. Even I managed not to gasp, at least not so that it showed, when Alfred announced the minimum which we would accept as a trading basis. There are still a few details to be ironed out, but the essentials are all agreed upon.

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"We get fifty thousand dollars in cash—to be divided equally, of course, between Alfred and me—forty-eight per cent. of the stock in the company to be formed, and a royalty of five per cent.

"I realized yesterday afternoon, for the first time, that between you and me no bargain had been struck. I shall, of course, return to you, as soon as I receive my check—to-morrow, I hope—the two thousand dollars on which the whole transaction pivoted. As to the further share which is rightfully yours, I suggest that, since you are probably a worse bargainer than I, we refer the matter to Alfred. And I only wait your release from the seal of confidence which you imposed upon me to take it up with him.

"I am, with a deeper and more whole-souled gratitude than it is possible for me to express,

"Yours most sincerely,

"MAJOR MARCH."

The main purport of this extremely explicit letter went by Celia almost uncomprehended. What her mind fastened upon were two or three phrases near the beginning that dealt with Alfred's already attained prosperity. His "broad mahogany board"

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in a private office, where they'd all been rooted for the past three or four days. The important people outside clamoring for audience with him and not getting it, obsequious secretaries and stenographers hovering about. He was sitting there like that now—while she ironed his shirts. He'd been there yesterday—while she had washed them. It had been a steaming hot day yesterday. For how many weeks—months—had the farce been going on? Had it ever been anything but a farce?

Well, yes, it had. She recalled with a hot fierce relish the night of their talk after her dinner-party. The agony there had been in his voice when he told her he couldn't stand the hell he'd been living in any longer. It was she who had pulled him out of that hell and given him a taste of Paradise instead. It had been a Paradise. There could be no doubt about that, either.

And this was how he had repaid her! With distrust, deceit—oh, downright lies. Making a fool of her with his precious thirty dollars a week in an envelope!

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Well, she had him now, as the saying is, to rights. She'd wait a little longer, until she was sure he had received his twenty-five thousand dollars. And then she'd ask him, casually, how the great invention was coming along. And when he said it wasn't coming, or that those things took a long while, and one couldn't expect anything yet, she'd show him Major March's check for her two thousand and ask him how about that.

She went on embroidering this lugubrious fancy for a while in the half-hearted belief that she found a sort of satisfaction in it. But she gave up the attempt at last and whole-heartedly wept.

What presently dried her tears and flushed her cheeks with a new fury of exasperation was the dazzling perception that the thing wouldn't come out that way at all. The picture she had been making up was as false as any movie she had ever looked at. Alfred wouldn't lie to her in that whole-cloth sort of way. He wouldn't be silly enough to try to get away with that. He'd tell her the truth, or as much of it as he thought expedient,

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and use it as a blanket for his past deception. He'd flaunt his check very likely before her eyes with a "Here we are, old lady. We can get a fresh start with this—set ourselves up in business. Cautiously, of course, perhaps not making any very great change in our way of living just yet."

There was something subtly infuriating about that picture and it made Celia see red. But there was a way to demolish it. And the time to demolish it was now. She washed her face, dressed, and, without wasting a move or a minute, unless you can consider wasted the ironic glance she allowed to rest upon the abandoned ironing-board, she went down-town to her husband's office.

She went with no definite idea of what she was going to find, and with no plan at all as to what she'd do when she found it. She knew where to go. At least, where to go first. She'd been to the place just once, and that visit was made within a fortnight of the time Alfred answered the blind advertisement in the *News* and got his job at twenty-two dollars and a half a week. It wasn't a very pleas-

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ant experience, since the foreman of the room, of whom she'd had to inquire for him, had growled, and indeed, had made it explicit that he didn't care to have his employees' time frivolously broken in upon. And Alfred's fellow draftsmen, who had taken up the cry for him and sent it rolling down the room, had acted like a lot of sophomores. Naturally she hadn't gone back.

She had used to lunch with him occasionally in those early days, but their meetings were effected by her stopping at the drug-store on the ground floor of the building and telephoning up to him. To-day, carried on by a current which cared nothing for foremen or sophomoric young men at drafting-tables, she boldly pushed open the never-forgotten door, and at a desk in a corner inquired of a foreman (the desk was the same, but the foreman was different) for Mr. Alfred Blair.

"A. C. Blair?" questioned the foreman. "You'll find him down-stairs where the general offices are. This is just the drafting-room up here. Same door as this, one story down."

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She went down one flight and opened the corresponding door she was directed to. She found herself in the railed-out space of a very big room—it was a dignified mahogany fence, rather than a rail. Inside it there were a great many desks and a great many people. Some of them rather impressive-looking people, too. But none of them, she was able swiftly to assure herself, was Alfred. There was a door, though, down at the end, marked “A. C. Blair. Private.”

“Who was it you wanted to see?” a languid voice inquired.

Turning in the direction the voice came from, Celia confronted a young lady at the telephone switchboard.

“I’d like to speak to Mr. Blair, if you please,” Celia said very politely indeed.

“He’s in an important conference,” said the young lady, “and can’t be disturbed.”

“Very well,” said Celia. “I’ll wait.”

There was a hard mahogany bench outside the rail where persons were, it appeared, at liberty to

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wait as long as they liked. But the movement of the young lady's very visible shoulders made it evident that she considered such a proceeding ill-advised and fruitless.

During the better part of an hour that Celia sat there the magnificence of her husband's isolation was further revealed to her. Lots of people tried to talk to him over the telephone, only to be turned away in most instances with the same formula that had been used for her.

Another thing Celia became aware of, though only vaguely, was that she herself was an object of some curiosity. A man from one of the desks down near the private door came out and had a low-voiced colloquy with the telephone girl, and then came over to her. Since Mr. Blair was busy, could no one else attend to her business for her? When Celia said it was Mr. Blair himself whom she wished to see, he told her that if she wished to give her name the girl would telephone it in. But Celia said this wasn't necessary. She would wait.

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She didn't mind waiting, as a matter of fact. She could afford to wait. Because when she did see him, at all events when he saw her, her vengeance would be instantaneous and terrible. He'd stand there before her red-handed, as it were.

It was with a startling suddenness that the telephone girl finally spoke to her. "There's Mr. Blair coming out of his office now," she said. "He seems to be going out. But you can speak to him if you like. He'll come this way."

And then followed what were, I think, the most eventful thirty seconds in Celia Blair's life. All she did with them was to get up and walk swiftly across the railed-out space to the telephone girl's desk and stand there, leaning over the switchboard, with her back to the little gate Alfred was coming through, as well as to the door he was going out of.

Also, she said to the telephone girl, with a miraculous kind of smile, "I'll wait till another time, I think, when he isn't so busy."

Of course, the important thing was what she did not do. She did not lay the irreparable ax to the

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tree of their mutual love and confidence and happiness.

I think, in all likelihood, it was that new sympathy with, and longing for, and understanding of, live growing things which had sprung up within her with the spring of the year, that saved her. A comprehension of the fact that while you could hew marble, or pour steel into forms prescribed by logic of a hard geometry, you could not deal with living things like that. Things that were alive could be killed.

She didn't think it out during those thirty seconds. All she had was a brilliant vision of what Alfred's face would look like when he saw her standing there confronting him. After that, until the door into the corridor had closed behind him, she merely prayed that he wouldn't think of some last message to leave with the telephone girl and come over and see her there.

She sat down again for two or three minutes after he'd gone, and then went home.

She found him there waiting for her. He'd



"There's Mr. Blair coming out of his office now," she said

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driven out, it seemed, in a taxi, and had had time to get rather worried. Not because she was away from home in the middle of the day, but because the look of the place indicated that she'd abandoned it in a hurry.

"It was pretty hot," she said. "I went out for some air. But you—! Home like this? Nothing's gone wrong, has it?"

"No," he said, "—right. I've got some things to tell you."

She cried out. "You don't mean Major March? Not the great invention?"

"Yes," he said, "there's that. We cleaned it up this morning. I've got a check for twenty-five thousand dollars in my pocket. Thought perhaps you'd like to have a look before I banked it. But let's not get started on that yet. There's something else."

From the burning intensity of the look in her wide-open eyes he turned away—walked off to the window. And there, with many haltings and stumblings, began telling her the story you know al-

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ready: how his first promotion had seemed so insecure that he'd put off telling her about it. How, when the day came that he needed capital for buying into the business, the very ease with which he'd got it made him seem rather a fool. Feel at least that he'd look rather a fool to her, and would make her suspect that the uprooting of their former life had been less the necessity he'd painted it than a sort of temperamental brainstorm on his own part. How, finally, he'd loved it so—exactly as it was, this new life of theirs—that he had, out of sheer cowardice, put off telling from day to day the thing that would make a change.

“I knew I had nothing to be afraid of, really—that no material change, I mean, could alter the essentials of this new thing of ours. I funk'd it, really, as one does the dentist. I've paid for it—I hope you'll believe that—exactly as one pays for putting off the dentist. The longer I put it off the worse it hurt, and the worse I knew it was going to hurt. But—well, the tooth's out now!

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You will forgive me, won't you? Oh, I know you will!"

He turned and looked at her then, and fairly cried out, she had gone so white. Naturally enough—only he couldn't understand—with the sense of the dreadful nearness of the peril she had escaped. But she came straight into his arms and he attributed the whiteness to the heat.

"We've got to get out of this," he said, "that's clear enough. But where we go, and how we live, that's in your hands." He kissed them both, and his voice broke. "In your hands, my dear."

Then, to get her quiet, he told her about the car he'd bought. They'd promised it for to-day, and he was furious because they'd failed him. But to-morrow, they said, was sure. He'd abandon the office for a week, and they'd take a little trip. Where would she like to go?

"We might cruise around," suggested Celia, "and look at places where we could live—not too far away from town for you to come in, but far

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enough so there'd be room—two or three acres—where things could have air and sun enough to grow in—flowers, and vegetables, and chickens, and a cow. And a baby.”

“That was why,” she told him after a while, “I sold the jewelry and gave the two thousand dollars to Major March.”

He amazed her by taking this announcement with a grin, rather than a gasp.

“Oh, Major didn't give you away!” he assured her. “But, of course, when the tests came out the way they did and I saw what we had, I asked him where he'd got the money. How much he'd had to pay for it. Because, of course, what he had had to pay ought to come out of my share as well as out of his. His way of refusing to tell me was so impressive—religious, you might almost call it—that it would have given almost anybody a hunch. And then, when he swore that the person who had given him the money hadn't driven any bargain for it at all, it struck me that there wasn't anybody else—couldn't be anybody else who'd be—”

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"Fool enough," Celia put in contentedly.

"Oh, well," he said, "I don't care what name you call it by."

He found out about her visit to the office, too. No later than next day. "That stenographer of mine," he said, "has got a queer bee in her bonnet. She swears that you were in my office yesterday morning, and that you waited there for an hour to see me, and then went away."

"It must have been a lady, then, I suppose," mused Celia. "Somebody all dressed up, probably, and terribly excited because they wouldn't let her in. But what made her think it was me? She's never seen me."

"Well, of course," said Alfred, "there are three pictures of you on my desk." And then, meeting her eyes, he cried out, "It *was* you!"

Well, the new car had arrived by then, and what with the excitement of getting ready for their trip and preparing the feast that Major March had been invited to for that night, and the delirious bliss of just dropping everything now and then and

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looking at each other, I suppose it is no wonder that they failed to treat that potential and so narrowly averted tragedy as soberly as it deserved. Indeed, beyond a guilty laugh from Celia, and a wry grin and an exclamation from Alfred, they didn't treat it at all.

Two or three nights later, though, out in the country and under a very fine yellow moon, in the course of talking over the whole adventure, he asked her why she let him off like that.

She said, with more meaning in her voice than there was in the words, "Oh, what would be the use? You may find me some time where you could smash me flat, or I find you. But I don't believe there's anything immoral about not paying off grudges, do you? There's something in the Bible about that. And don't you think we're both much nicer this way than we would be—crushed?"

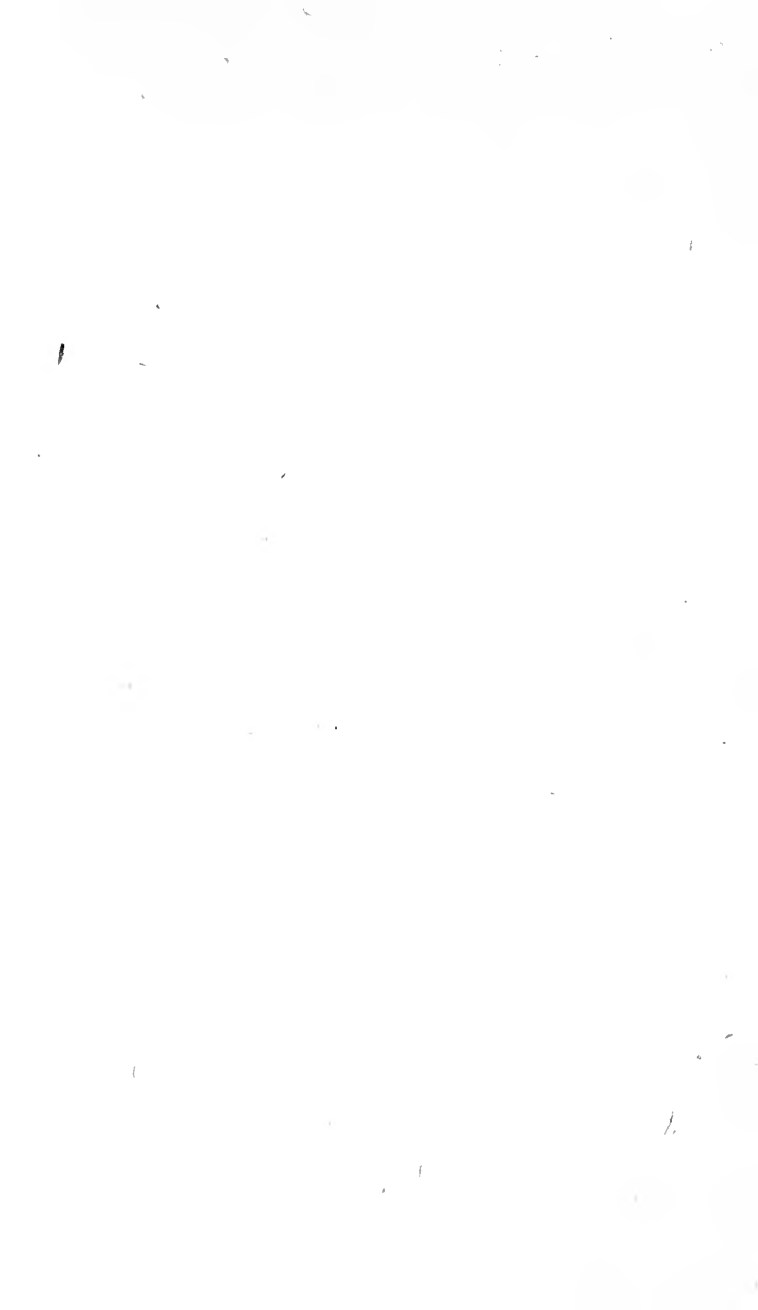
He couldn't take it as lightly as that, but his feelings wouldn't go into adequate words.

"You little thoroughbred," he said.

THE END









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